LADY LARKSPUR

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

only a hard up sewably mounted

10 Ex 100

BY MEREDITH NICHOLSON

LADY LARKSPUR

THE MADNESS OF MAY

THE VALLEY OF DEMOCRACY

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

LADY LARKSPUR

LADY LARKSPUR

BY

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1919

COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Published March, 1919

COPYRIGHT, 1918, BY P. F. COLLIER & SONS, INC.

TO

BENNETT AND PEGGY GATES

2226899

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The "Troops"	1
II.	The Amazing Widow	38
III.	A Fan	79
IV.	Pursuing Knights	112
V.	Alice	138

CHAPTER I

THE "TROOPS"

"IT was hard luck," said Searles, "that I should spend a year writing a play for a woman only to find that she had vanished—jumped off the earth into nowhere. This was my highest flight, Singleton, the best writing I ever did, and after the vast pains I took with the thing, the only woman I ever saw who could possibly act it is unavailable; worse than that, absolutely undiscoverable! Nobody knows I have this script; I've kept quiet about it simply because I'm not going to be forced into accepting a star I don't want. I have a feeling about this play that I never had about my other things. That girl was its inspiration. The public has been so kind to my small offerings that I'm trying to lead 'em on to the best I can do; something a little finer and more imaginative, with a touch of poetry, if you please. And now——"

He rose from his broad work-table (he scorned the familiar type of desk) and glared at me as though I were responsible for his troubles. As he knew I had been flying in the French Aviation Corps for two years and had just been invalided home, I didn't think it necessary to establish an alibi. But I hastened to express my sympathy for his predicament. Fate had been kind to Dick Searles. In college he had written a play or two that demonstrated his talent, and after a rigid apprenticeship as scene-shifter and assistant producer he had made a killing with "Let George Do It," a farce that earned enough to put him at ease and make possible an upward step into straight comedy. Even as we talked a capacity house was laughing at his skit, "Who Killed Cock Robin?" just around the corner from his lodgings. So his story was not the invention of a rejected playwright to cover the non-appearance of a play which nobody would produce.

"Isn't it always a mistake to write a play for a particular star?" I suggested. "Seems to me I've read somewhere that that is among the besetting sins of you playwrights."

"Old stuff, my boy; but this isn't one of those cases. The person I had in mind for this play wasn't a star, but a beginner, quite unknown. It was when I was in London putting on 'Fairy Gold' that I saw her; she had a small part in a pantomime, and pantomime is the severest test of an actor's powers, you know. A little later she appeared in 'Honourable Women,' a capital play that died early, but there again I felt her peculiar charm—it was just that. Her part was a minor one, but she wore it as she might wear a glove; she was exquisite! No one ever captured my imagination as she did. I watched her night after night. I was afraid that when I heard her voice it would break the spell, and I actually shook like a man with an ague when she tripped out on the stage as the ingénue in 'Honourable Women.' And her laughter! You know how hollow the usual stage mirth is, but that girl's laugh had the joy of the lark ascending!"

"By Jove!" I ejaculated, "there's more here than appears. You're in love with the girl!"

"Rubbish," he cried impatiently. "You'll

think I'm talking rot, but this girl was the visualization of a character I had dreamed of and groped after for years. That's all; but it's a whole lot, I can tell you!"

"Of course, you established lines of communication and gave her a hint that you meant to write a play for her?"

"Certainly not! That would have spoiled the whole thing. It was her art, not the woman, that interested me. I didn't want to take the chance of being disillusioned. I have been through that experience, and I prefer not to meet the people who act in my pieces. I want their art, not their views on human destiny or the best place to get lobster à la Newburg."

"Let us be practical for a moment, Searles," I urged. "Emperors, presidents, and popular murderers are not more conspicuous than the people of the stage. No girl talented enough to get two engagements, even for small parts, in a first-class London theatre could vanish. With your acquaintance in the profession you'd be able to trace her anywhere on earth. By the way, what did the paragon call herself?"

"Violet Dewing was her stage name and the only name the managers knew her by. I assumed that, of course, all I had to do was to finish my play and then have Dalton, who represents me over there, make an appointment to read it to her; but Dalton worked for three months trying to find her, without success. She clearly wasn't the product of the provincial theatres—hadn't any of the marks. I wasn't the only person who was interested in her. Dalton said half a dozen managers had their eye on her, but after 'Honourable Women' closed she stepped into the void. I know what you're thinking—that the other members of the two companies she appeared with must have had some inkling of her identity, but I tell you Dalton and I exhausted the possibilities. It was by accident that she got her chance in the pantomime—some one wouldn't do at the last minute, and they gave Miss Dewing a trial. She was well liked by her associates in spite of the fact that she was a bit offish and vanished from their world the minute the curtain fell."

"A clever governess out of a job, satisfying a craving for excitement and playing the mys-

terious rôle as part of the adventure. Am I to assume that you've burned your play and that the incident is closed?"

"Oh, I didn't burn it; I have a copy locked in a safety vault, and Dalton left one heavily sealed at a small exclusive London hotel where, he found after much difficulty, the girl had lodged during her two engagements."

"You're morbid," I said. "Show me her photograph."

He laughed ironically. "Never a chance, Singleton! You haven't yet got the idea that this young woman is out of the ordinary. She refused to be photographed—wrote it into her two contracts that this was not to be asked. I never saw her off the stage, and I can't give you a description of her that would be of the slightest assistance to the keenest detective alive. As I've tried to convey to your practical mind, it's the spirit of the girl —the spirit of comedy, that I've dramatized—not a girl you take out to supper only to find that she has no wit, no charm, no anything but a monstrous appetite for indigestible food and a silly ambition to play rôles the gods never intended her to play. In that panto-

mime she was a frolic, the clown's daughter, and, though nobody saw it, she was the whole piece, the elusive sprite that could evoke laughter and tears by a gesture, a lifting of the brows, a grimace. By utterly different methods in 'Honourable Women' she proved her wide range of appeal. The chap who produced 'Honourable Women' told me that after the first rehearsal Bayley, the author, begged him for God's sake to let the girl do it her own way, so as not to lose her freshness and spontaneity. Hers was the one true characterization in the piece. When Terry was in her prime you remember how we used to say that only one bird sang like that, and from paradise it flew? Well, this bird sings on the same branch! Her voice was her charm made audible! She's the most natural being I ever saw on the stage, and she can *look* more comedy than anybody else I ever saw act!"

"Rave some more!" I pleaded. "You never talked better in your life."

"Don't be an ass," he said sourly. "Let's forget her and take a squint at your affairs. Just what do you mean to do with yourself?"

"My shoulder still creaks a little, and the doctors advise me to sit around for a while. They offered me some jobs in Washington, but desk work and inspection duty are too tame after a couple of years spent in star climbing. The doctors tell me to cultivate repose for a few months and maybe they'll pass me into our flying corps, but they don't promise anything. I'm going up to Barton-on-the-Sound and I'll camp in the garage on my uncle's place. You remember that I built the thing myself, and the quarters are good enough for a busted veteran."

"Your uncle played you a nasty trick," interrupted Searles; "getting married and then adding to the crime by dying. You couldn't beat that for general spitefulness."

"Do you remember the immortal lines:

> "'Oh, skip your dear uncle!'
> The Bellman exclaimed
> As he angrily tingled his bell"?

"Oh, I'm not knocking the dead!" he protested. "Mr. Bashford always struck me as a pretty decent, square sort of chap, and not at all the familiar grouchy uncle of fiction and

the drama. I made notes on him from time to time with a view to building a play around him—the perfect uncle, unobtrusive, never blustering at his nephew; translating the avuncular relationship into something remote and chaste like a distant view of Mount Washington in winter. As I recall, there were only two great passions in your uncle's life—Japanese art and green-turtle soup. It was just like him to retire from business on his sixtieth birthday and depart for the Orient, there to commit the shameless indiscretion of matrimony."

"Like him! It was the greatest shock of my life. To the best of my knowledge he never knew any women except the widow of his partner in the importing house. He used to dine with her now and then, and I caught him once sending her flowers at Easter—probably an annual stunt. She was about eighty and perfectly safe. He spent twenty years in the Tyringham, the dullest and most respectable hotel in the world, and his chief recreation was a leisurely walk in the park before going to bed. You could set your clock by him. Pretty thin picking for a dramatist, I

should think. He used to take me to the theatre regularly every other Thursday—it was a date—and his favorite entertainment was vaudeville with black-face embellishment preferred. You should add that to Japanese pottery and potage à la tortue. He joined the yacht club just because the green turtle at that joint is the best in New York. Yachts! He never sailed in anything but the biggest steamers, and got no fun out of that. I crossed with him twice, and he never left his bunk. But in his shy fashion he was kind and generous and mighty good to me."

"If you hadn't gone to war, but had kept right at his elbow, the marriage might have been averted," suggested Searles. "He did leave you something, didn't he?"

"Fifty thousand cash and the right to use the garage at the Barton farm. Calling it a farm is a joke; it's rocks mostly. He bought the house to have a place to store his prints and ceramics. He hated motoring except in taxis up and down town, and when I urged him to set up a machine, he told me to go ahead and buy one and build the garage. He rather sniffed at the writing I do, but told me

I'd better fix up a studio in the garage and have it as a place to work in. His will provides that I may lodge in the garage for life."

"The estate footed a million, as I remember, so I can't praise his generosity. But the widow, your unknown auntie, the body-snatcher who annexed the old boy—what of her?"

"I've asked the trust company people whether she's in sight anywhere, and they assure me that she is not on these shores. Torrence, the third vice-president—you know Torry; he was in the class ahead of us at college, the man who never smiles—Torry seemed anxious to learn about her from me, which is certainly droll. He said she acknowledged her last remittance three months ago from Bangkok—wherever that is. Torry couldn't see that Bangkok is so absurdly remote that the idea of a widow's strolling off there is funny. I suppose the old girl's resumed her tour of the world looking for another retired merchant to add to her list."

"Very likely. To what nation, tribe, or human group does this predatory person belong?"

"I'll tell you all I know. Just as I was sailing for France I got a letter from Uncle Bash stating in the most businesslike fashion that he was about to be married to a lady he had met on his trip out to Japan. The dire event was to occur at the American Embassy the following day. From which I judged that my presence at the ceremony was neither expected nor desired. Oddly enough, months afterward, I picked up an English paper in a French inn that contained an announcement of the marriage in the usual advertisement form. The lady was succinctly described as Mrs. Alice Wellington Cornford, widow of the late Archibald Reynolds Cornford, Pepperharrow Road, Hants. All Torrence knows of the subsequent proceedings is what he got in official reports of Uncle Bash's death from the consul-general at Tokyo. He was buried over there and the life-insurance companies were rather fussy about the legal proof, Torry says. Whether the widow expects to come to America ultimately or will keep moving through the Orient marrying husbands and burying them is a dark mystery. If she should turn up, the house at Barton is hers,

of course, but with her roving disposition I fancy my aunt Alice wouldn't like the place. The Jap stuff is worth a bit of money, and if the lady is keen for such things and not a mere adventuress she may take it into her head one of these days to come over and inspect the loot."

"I can see the vampire," said Searles musingly, "landing at the Grand Central with enough hand-luggage to fill a freight-car; a big, raw-boned creature, with a horse face and a horrible mess as to clothes. You will be there to meet her, deferential, anxious to please. You will pilot her up the coast to Barton, tip the servants heavily to keep them from murdering her, and twiddle your thumbs in your garage as you await her further pleasure. By the way, are those ancient freaks still on the place—those broken-down hotel employees who were your uncle's sole experiment in philanthropy?"

"Torrence assures me that they are all very much there."

Searles yielded himself to laughter. "An Englishwoman with lofty ideas of domestic service would certainly enjoy a romp with

that crew. I supposed the trust company had brushed them into the Sound before this."

"Oh, they are in the same class with me," I explained. "The place can't be sold till I die, and while I live they're to be harbored—about thirty of them—clothed and victualled."

"I think there's a farce in the idea, and I may try it one of these days," he said, scribbling in his note-book. "A refuge for broken-down chambermaids, venerable bell-hops grown gray in the service, and the head waiter who amassed a fortune in tips and then toyed with the market once too often and lost his ill-gotten gains. What was the head waiter's name who presided with so much stateliness in the dining-room of the Tyringham? I mean the white-haired chap who was so particular about the foot-cushions for the nice old ladies in caps and lavender ribbons and India shawls—I think I can work him in somewhere."

"That's Antoine, who married the assistant housekeeper at the Tyringham. He's the butler and has charge of the place—a sort of commander-in-chief of the outfit. When I get settled I'll ask you up and you can study the bunch at leisure."

"Splendid! Reserve one room for me on the sunny side of the garage and I'll be up in a couple of weeks. I'm going to Ohio to-morrow for a family reunion and a look at the loved spots my infancy knew."

"You're lucky to have home-folks even in Ohio," I remarked enviously.

"Well, there's always your distant auntie, cruising the seven seas in pursuit of husbands. Nobody with an aunt to his credit can pretend to be alone in the world. There *is* something about an aunt, Singleton! Aunts must rank just a little below mothers in the heavenly kingdom. When I was a boy out in Ohio there were two great occasions every year in my life—one when I went to visit a grand old aunt I had in the country, the other when she visited us, arriving with a wagon-load of jam, jelly, salt-rising bread, pound-cake, and other unpurchasable manna."

"Stop! or I'll call the food censor," I pleaded, picking up my hat. "Send me your copy of 'Lady Geranium,' and I'll tell you whether it's a classic or not."

" 'Lady Larkspur,' " he corrected with a shudder. "You shall have it by trusted messenger to-morrow."

I wired Antoine that I would reach Barton-on-the-Sound the following day. This was September, 1917. The former servants of the Tyringham were established on the place by my uncle the year before he dropped business cares and departed for the Japan of his dreams, and as I had been often at the hotel where he spent so many of the years of his life, I knew most of the old retainers. They were deeply appreciative of his kindness, and when I had gone to the farm for an uninterrupted month in finishing some piece of writing they had shown me the greatest consideration.

As the train rolled along the familiar shore toward Barton I shook off the depression occasioned by my enforced retirement from the great struggle overseas. I had done under the French flag all that it was possible for me to do; and there was some consolation in the fact that by reason of my two years on the battle-line I was just so much ahead of the friends I met in New York who were answering the call to the colors and had their experience of war all before them. The tranquil life that had been recommended by the doctors was not only possible at Barton, but it was

the only life that could be lived there. Plenty of exercise in the open and regular habits would, I had been assured, set me up again, and my leisure I meant to employ in beginning a novel that had been teasing me ever since I sailed for home.

Of my uncle Bash I had only the happiest and most grateful memories. Quite naturally it had occurred to me at times, and my friends had encouraged the idea, that my uncle would die some day and leave me his money. There was no particular reason why he should do so, as he had never manifested any unusual affection for me and I had certainly never done anything for him.

Antoine was at the Barton station with the touring-car Uncle Bash had bought to establish communication with the village. Flynn, the big Irishman who had been the doorman at the Tyringham for years and retired because of rheumatism acquired from long exposure to the elements at the hostelry's portals, was at the wheel.

Antoine greeted me with that air of lofty condescension tempered with a sincere kindliness that had made him a prince among head

waiters. As I shook hands with him his lips quivered and tears came to his eyes. Flynn, standing beside the car, saluted with a welcoming grin.

"Very glad to see you, sorr. The trunk came this mornin' all right, sorr, and we put it in your room."

I bade Antoine join me in the back seat that he might the more easily bring me up to date as to affairs on the estate.

"It must be a little slow up here after the years you lived in town," I suggested, "but of course you're all old friends."

"Well, yes; all friends," he acquiesced, but with so little enthusiasm that I glanced at him quickly. He pretended to be absorbed in the flying landscape at the moment. Flynn, I noticed, was giving ear to our conversation from the wheel.

"It was sad, very sad, Mr. Bashford passing away so far from home, sir. It was a great shock. And he had looked forward for years to a quiet life abroad. It must have been ten years ago he first mentioned his hope of retiring to Japan."

Uncle Bash had given me no such forecast

of his intentions, and I felt humble before this proof of Antoine's greater intimacy. Once at the beginning of our acquaintance, when I had complimented Antoine on his English, he explained that he was born in England of French parents. His father had been chef and his mother housekeeper for an American banker who lived for many years in London. Antoine's speech was that of a well-trained English upper servant, and I imagined that in his youth he had taken some English butler as his model. He used to pretend that he knew French very imperfectly, and I was surprised when he now addressed me quite fluently in that language.

"You have been with the armies of dear France," he remarked. "The war is very dreadful. My parents were of Verdun; it grieves me to know of the suffering in the land of my people."

As I replied sympathetically in French I saw Flynn straighten himself at the wheel with an impatient fling of his head. Antoine indicated him with a contemptuous nod: "Married Elsie, the German woman who worked in the linen-room at the Tyringham!

This has caused some trouble, and there is a pantry girl, Gretchen, who was ill a long time before the master left, and he sent her here for the country air. She is a little devil with her dear Fatherland."

I laughed at the old fellow's gravity and earnestness. That the war should be making itself felt on the quiet acres at Barton-on-the-Sound was absurd.

"But there can be no trouble; everything is peaceful, of course, save for a little foolish talk——"

The Gaul asserted itself in a shrug, a form of expression rare in him. I was pondering the recrudescence of race hatreds due to the upheaval in Europe when he startled me by a statement uttered close to my ear:

"There have been inquiries for the widow; these have caused me much anxiety."

"Widow! Whose widow?"

"Madame, the widow of the dear master. It seems that there are persons anxious to see her. There have been inquiries, one—two—three times."

"Probably some of her American friends

anxious to pay their respects, or some of the neighbors making calls of courtesy," I suggested.

"A foreign gentleman who acts very queerly," Antoine persisted.

My uncle's widow was a vague, unknown being whom I had never expected to cross my horizons. If she meditated a descent upon Barton-on-the-Sound, the trust company would certainly have had some hint of her approach, but Torrence clearly had had no tidings of her beyond her last communication from Bangkok. Still, it was wholly possible that a globe-trotting widow would have friends in many parts of the world, and I could see nothing disturbing in the fact that inquiries had been made for her. I said as much. Antoine's answer was another shrug and a jerk of his head toward Flynn, as though even the employment of an alien tongue might not conceal our conversation from the big Irishman. Antoine was manifestly impatient at my refusal to be aroused by his hints of discord among his associates and my lack of interest in the inquiries for Mrs. Bashford. When we had reached the farm and

were running through the grounds Antoine spoke again:

"We thought we would put you up at the house, Mr. Singleton, and not in the garage," he said inquiringly.

"Not at all, Antoine," I answered quickly. "We must stick close to the law in such matters."

"Very good, sir. Stop at the garage, Flynn."

To the casual observer the garage was a charming two-story house following the general lines of the plaster and timber residence, from which it was separated by a strip of woodland and a formal garden. The garage and quarters for the chauffeur were at one end and at the other were a down-stairs living-room, with a broad fireplace, and three chambers above so planned as to afford a charming view of the Sound, whose shore curved in deeply at this point. On the chauffeur's side was a small kitchen from which I had been served with my meals when I lodged there. This thoroughly convenient establishment was the only place I could call home, and I experienced a pleasurable sense of comfort

as I opened the door into the snug living-room.

"The house is in order. You will have your meals at the residence, I suppose, sir," Antoine suggested.

I debated this a moment, and when he hinted that dinner could be more conveniently served there than in my own quarters, I said that for the present the Flynns might give me breakfast and luncheon at the garage, but that I would dine at the house. The original owner of the property, from whose executor my uncle had purchased it with all its belongings, had accumulated a remarkable library, rich in the Elizabethan stuff for which I have a weakness, and it occurred to me that it would be pleasant to eat my solitary dinner at the residence and loaf in the library for an hour afterward. Like most slaves of the ink-pot, I habitually postpone actual labor as long as possible, and if I were to dine at the garage I should have no excuse for not plunging at once into my novel. The Tyringham people were domiciled in cottages scattered over the estate, though a full staff of house servants was established in the residence.

It was five o'clock when I reached the garage, and Antoine left me after opening my bags with the suggestion that I could summon Zimmerman, a former valet of the Tyringham, for any service I might require. I knew Zimmerman very well and said I would call him when occasion required.

"He is of that race," said Antoine plaintively in the French which now seemed to come readily enough to his lips.

"Race? Botheration! You mustn't trouble yourself about race questions out here, Antoine. Zimmerman is a good old chap, who's probably forgotten the very name of the German town he was born in."

"They do not forget," Antoine replied with emphasis. "There has been much discussion —much——"

"Forget it, Antoine! I supposed you were all living here like a happy family. You've been sticking too close to the farm, and it would do you good to run into town for a week. Please tell them at the residence that I'll dine at seven."

"Very good, sir," he said in his pompous Tyringham manner, but I saw that he was miffed by my indifference.

Flynn, having disposed of the car, came to ask if there was anything he could do for me. When I had explained my arrangement with Antoine he still lingered.

"Tony's against the wife and me," he said mournfully. "It's the war, sorr, and she and me that lile, sorr, the American flag floats from the garage every day. And if a heart can be lile, Elsie's as true to America as though she was born in Boston State-house."

"I believe you, Flynn," I said, touched by his earnestness. "Don't you worry about Antoine and the rest of them; they're just a little nervous; I'll see what I can do to straighten things out."

As I went about my unpacking I was sorry that I had discouraged Antoine's confidences. That these old hotel servants, flung upon a farm with little to do, should fall to quarrelling was not surprising, but what he had said as to the inquiries for Mrs. Bashford had roused my curiosity. In spite of my legal right to live on the farm, I had no intention of remaining if my uncle's widow turned up. Alone on the estate I could lodge in the garage without any loss of dignity, but with an aunt on the premises my status would be decidedly un-

comfortable. She could hardly fail to regard me as an intruding poor relation, no matter how strictly I kept to my own quarters. It was possible that she might even confuse me with the veterans of the Tyringham, and, while I am no snob, I did not relish the idea of being classed by a strange aunt with a crowd of broken-down hotel employees.

I whistled myself into good humor as I dressed and started for the house along the driveway, which followed the shore, veering off for a look at the sunken garden, one of the few features of the place that had ever interested my uncle.

As I paused on the steps I caught sight of a man sitting dejectedly on a stone bench near a fountain whose jet tossed and caught a ball with languid iteration. I had identified him as an old Tyringham bell-hop, known familiarly as Dutch, before he heard my step and sprang to his feet, grabbing a pitchfork whose prongs he presented threateningly.

"Oh, it's you, sir," he faltered, dropping the implement. "Excuse me, sir!"

"What's your trouble, Dutch? You're not expecting burglars, are you?"

"Well, no, sir, but things on the place ain't what they wuz. It's my name, which ain't my name, not reg'lar, that's caused feelin'. They've drove me out, an' I'm campin' in the tool-house. An' me born right there in New York an' American clean through. My grandpap came across when he wuz a kid, but it ain't my fault he wuz Goiman. I'd 'a' made 'im a Frenchy or a Dago or somethin' else if I could 'a' done it. Mr. Singleton, I don't know no Goîman except pretzel, sauerkraut, wiener wurst, and them kind o' woids."

"Those belong to the universal language, Dutch," I answered consolingly. "What is your name, anyhow?"

"Augustus Schortemeier, and I say it ain't no worse'n Longfellow," he protested.

The point was delicate and not one that I felt myself qualified to discuss. To cover my confusion I suggested that poets enjoy a certain license, but I was honestly sorry for Dutch. If he was not the oldest living bellhop, he was at least entitled to honorable mention among the most ancient veterans of the calling, vocation, or avocation of the bellhopper. I bade him cheer up and passed on.

As I reached the house I heard a sharp command in an authoritative voice and saw at a curve of the driveway a number of men in military formation performing evolutions in the most sprightly manner. They carried broomsticks, and at sight of me the commander brought his company to a very ragged "Present arms!" Their uniform was that of the Tyringham bell-hops and waiters, and it dawned upon me that this was an army of protest representing the Allied armies on the shores of Connecticut. There was a dozen of them, and the captain I recognized as Scotty, a hop who had long worn the Tyringham livery. I waved my hand to them and turned to find Antoine awaiting me at the door.

"It's the troops, sir," he explained. "It's to keep Dutch and Gretchen and Elsie—she's the wife of that Flynn—in proper order, sir."

"Troops" was a large term for the awkward squad of retired waiters and bell-hops, and it was with difficulty that I kept my face straight.

"It's most unfortunate, but we was forced to it. Dinner is served, sir."

From the table in the long dining-room I

caught glimpses through the gathering dusk of Scotty's battalion at its evolutions.

"They keep a guard all night, sir," Antoine explained, not without pride. "The goings on has been most peculiar."

"Antoine!" I said sharply, "what do you mean by these hints of trouble on the place? You're not silly enough to imagine that Dutch and a couple of women can do anything out here to aid America's enemies! The rest of you ought to be ashamed of yourselves for annoying them. And as for these inquiries about Mrs. Bashford, they couldn't possibly have anything to do with the war. Specifically, who are the persons who've asked for her?"

"There's the party I told you about, most persistent, who's motored here three times, and another person who seems to be looking for *him*, sir. It's most singular."

"It's singularly ridiculous; that's all. They're probably piano-tuners or rival agents for a rug house or something of that sort who don't know that Mrs. Bashford isn't here or at all likely to be."

"They may be agents, but not that kind,

sir." His lips quivered, either from fear or vexation at my refusal to take his story seriously.

"If anything tangible happens, Antoine," I said kindly, "anything we can really put our hands on, we'll certainly deal with it. But you mustn't get nervous or allow yourself to suspect everybody who turns up here of evil designs against the Republic. I've come here for quiet, you know, and we can't have every passing stranger throwing the place into a panic."

I had no sooner reached the library, where he gave me coffee, than I heard a slow, measured tread on the broad brick terrace that ran along the house on the side toward the Sound. The windows were open and the guard was in plain view. I glanced at Antoine, whose attitude toward me was that of one benevolently tolerant of stupidity. He meant to save me in spite of my obtuseness. "Tell the picket to remove himself where I won't hear him, if you please, Antoine."

He disappeared through one of the French windows and in a moment I saw the guard patrolling a walk some distance from the

house. I now made myself comfortable with a book and a cigar, but I had hardly settled myself for a quiet hour before I heard a commotion from the direction of the gate, followed a few minutes later by a shout and a noisy colloquy, after which a roadster arrived in haste at the front door.

"Mr. Torrence, sir," announced Antoine. "I'm sorry, sir, but he ran by the guard at the gate, and our man below the house stopped him. It's a precaution we've been taking, sir."

Torrence's sense of humor was always a little feeble, and I hastened into the hall to reassure him as to his welcome. He was wiping the perspiration from his face and swearing under his breath.

"For God's sake, Singleton, what's happened here? A band of pirates jumped on my running-board, and after I'd knocked them off a road-agent stopped me right there in sight of the house and poked the muzzle of a shotgun in my face."

"Mighty sorry you were annoyed, but there have been some queer characters about, tramps and that sort of thing, and the people

on the place are merely a little anxious. Have a cigar?"

"All I can say is that you'd better send your friends the password! That fool out there with the gun——"

"Only a bell-hop, nothing more," I interrupted.

"—That fool, I say, is likely to kill somebody. Antoine"—he turned to the butler, who was drawing the curtains at the windows —"if the property's been threatened, you should have informed me immediately."

"Yes, sir; but it's only been quite recent, and, knowing Mr. Singleton was coming, we didn't like to bother you."

"We can only apologize, Torry," I interposed. "The employees have been alarmed, but we're bound to commend their zeal."

"Humph!" he ejaculated, the wounds to his dignity still rankling.

I forced a cigar upon him and talked of the weather to cover Antoine's retreat. I resolved not to tell him the real cause of the servant's apprehensions, knowing his disposition to magnify trifles and fearing he might send the police to investigate. He lived only

five miles from Barton, a fact to which he now referred.

"Hadn't heard of any tramps over my way," he said, frowning. "These old lunatics your uncle left here are simply hipped; that's all. Mr. Bashford made a mistake in turning the place over to them; it was silly, downright silly. It's a wonder you didn't think of upsetting his will on the ground of mental unsoundness. It's not up to me to suggest such a thing, but I believe you could knock it out!"

"Oh, chuck it! They're well-meaning helpless people, and it's bully that Uncle Bash provided a home for them. There's nobody else to use the place."

His cigar had proved soothing, but my last remark caused him to sit up straight in his chair.

"By George! my hold-up almost made me forget what I came for. I have news for you, Singleton; good or bad, as you may take it; Mrs. Bashford is in America."

"Mrs. Bashford," I repeated faintly, "where do you get these pleasant tidings?"

"This," he answered, producing a tele-

gram, "is all I know about it. Got it just as I was leaving the office this afternoon, and thought I'd motor over and give you a pleasant surprise."

He seemed to enjoy my discomfiture. The message read:

"PITTSFIELD, MASS., Sept. 20.

"J. B. TORRENCE,"

Bainbridge Trust Co., New York.

Landed at Seattle a week ago, and have been motoring east from Chicago to see the country. Will reach Barton in four or five days. Please wire me at the Washington Inn, Lenox, whether house is in order for occupancy.

"ALICE BASHFORD."

"Well, what do you say to that?" he demanded.

"I say it's taking unfair advantage," I answered savagely. "I've got to clear out; that's the first thing."

"Not necessarily. Your right to the garage is settled; she couldn't oust you if she wanted to. You've got to stay here anyhow till she

comes; there's no ducking that. The widow of an uncle who did a lot for you, a stranger to the country; it's up to you to see her established. There are many little courtesies she would naturally expect from you."

"I'm delighted that you see my duty so clearly! If you hadn't assured me that she was safe at the end of the world I wouldn't have set foot here."

"The house is in order, I judge," he remarked, glancing about the room. "I've got to wire her that we're ready for her."

"You most certainly have! Your duty is as plain as a smoke-stack. You might add that she's causing serious inconvenience to her late husband's only nephew."

"You really don't mean that?" he inquired anxiously.

"Oh, thunder, no!"

I had forgotten how trying Torrence could be. He now suggested that we summon Antoine and take a look at the house. Torrence is a conscientious fellow with an exact and orderly mind, and there was no corner of the place from cellar to garret that we didn't explore. It was highly creditable to the old

Tyringham servants that the house was thoroughly habitable. All that need be done before Mrs. Bashford arrived was to lay linen on the beds and take the jackets from the furniture; a couple of hours would suffice, Antoine said.

As we were on our way down-stairs the old fellow detained me a moment.

"Have you told him about the parties? Pardon me, sir," he whispered, "but him and the trust company is responsible. I thought likely you'd tell him."

I shook my head in angry rejection of the idea that I should tell Torrence about "the parties," and dismissed him as soon as we reached the hall.

"I suggest," said Torrence, "that when she comes you have flowers in all the rooms; the conservatory will supply enough. And it occurs to me that the more inconspicuous you make this bunch of lazy dependents the more agreeable it will be for Mrs. Bashford."

"You don't expect much of me! It was never in the contract that I should become the patriarch of these venerable relics. But I'll warn them to conceal themselves as much as

possible. I fully expect to leave the reservation for good just one hour after the lady arrives."

"That's your affair, of course. As she's motoring, we can't just time her arrival, but when I get a wire that she's on the way I'll telephone you. And, of course, after she gets here I'll come at once to pay my respects."

"You can't come too soon!" I answered spitefully.

CHAPTER II

THE AMAZING WIDOW

AS soon as Torrence left I returned to the garage, feeling that with Mrs. Bashford on American soil my use of the residence even as a loafing-place was unbecoming. Mrs. Bashford was not only in America, but with a motor at her command she might reach Barton at any hour. And the vigorous, dominating woman who had captured my uncle Bash, buried him in a far country, and then effected a hop, skip, and jump from Bangkok to Seattle, was likely to be a prodigal spender of gasoline. Her propensity for travelling encouraged the hope that she would quickly weary of Barton and pine for lands where the elephant and jinrickisha flourish.

I had brought with me the manuscript of Searles's play, and I fell upon it irritably and began reading the first act. The dialogue moved briskly, and I read on as though enfolded in the air of a crisp spring morning.

It was Searles's whimsical stroke, only with a better vehicle than he had ever before found for it. My grouch over the upsetting of my plans yielded under the spell of his humor.

"Lady Larkspur" was the name assumed by the daughter of a recluse naturalist in the valley of Virginia. She had known no life but that of the open country, where she ran wild all summer, aiding her father in collecting plants and butterflies. At twenty she had never seen a city, and her social contacts had been limited to the country folk, who viewed her with commiseration as the prisoner of her misanthrope father, who in the fifteen years of his exile had maintained a hostile attitude toward his neighbors. He had, however, educated the girl in such manner that only the cheer and joy of life were known to her. Hating mankind, he had encouraged her in nature-worship. She knew no literature except the classics; all history, even the history of the storied valley in which she lived, was a sealed book to her.

The girl's curiosity is roused by the sudden appearance of strangers from the unknown world beyond, whom she mystifies by her

quaint old-worldishness. Searles had taken an old theme and given a novel twist to it. The solution of the mystery of the father's exile and an amusing complication of lovers afforded a suspensive interest well sustained to the end. There were innumerable charming scenes, as where the girl in the outlandish costume in which she roamed the hills perches on a boulder and recites the "Iliad" to her suitors. In the last act she appears at a ball at a country house in sophisticated raiment, and the story ends in the key of mirth in which it began.

It was a delightful blending and modernization of Diana, Atalanta, Cinderella, and Rosalind; but even in the typewritten page it was amazingly alive and well calculated to evoke tears and laughter. That a play so enthralling should be buried in a safety-vault was not to be thought of, and I sat down and wrote Searles a long letter demanding that he at once forget the lost star for whom he had written the piece, suggesting the names of several well-known actresses I thought worth considering for the difficult leading rôle. Not satisfied with this, I telephoned a telegram to

the agent at Barton for transmission to Searles at the Ohio address he had given me.

The next day passed without incident, and on the second, hearing nothing from Torrence, I began to doubt Mrs. Bashford's proximity. On the third, still hearing nothing, I harkened to an invitation from friends at New London and drove over in the runabout for dinner. It was midnight when I got back, and when I reached the gates several men dashed out of the lodge and halted me.

"She's come, sir," announced Antoine, emerging from the darkness, and speaking under stress of deep emotion; "madame the widow has arrived, sir!"

"Why not Cleopatra or the Queen of Sheba?" I exclaimed testily to cover my annoyance that my aunt had effected her descent in my absence. "Well, she was expected; the house is hers; what do you want me to do about it?" I ended with affected jocularity.

"We received her the best we could; but it was most unfortunate, your not being here, sir."

"Is that your idea, Antoine, or do you re-

flect the lady's sentiments? I'm properly humiliated either way. Tell me just what she said."

"Well, sir, she just laughed when I took the liberty of apologizing."

"The sneering laughter of outraged dignity! Go ahead and give me the rest of it."

"It was at ten she came, sir, and the guard held her up, not recognizing her, here at the gate, and when the car didn't stop the boys chased her and fired at the tires of her machine. It was very dreadful, sir. And at the house—at the door, sir—the guard was very harsh with her, sir, most regrettable."

"You certainly made a mess of it!" I ejaculated. "But you did let her in—into her own house, we must remember—you did grant her the courtesy of a lodging for the night?" I inquired ironically.

"She's retired, sir. There was a lady with her; maybe a maid; I can't exactly say; and we did everything, sir, to make her comfortable. She was not what you might say fussy, sir, but quite human-like. We was all relieved, sir, the way she took everything. I

hope you'll pardon us, sir, which was due to not being warned."

"Oh, it's all right with me, but in the morning she'll probably bounce the whole lot of us. An old lady fatigued from a journey cross country and shot at on her own premises—it's a very pretty story."

They were a picturesque lot, the ancient waiters and bell-hops grouped about Antoine with their lanterns and garden inplements and firearms. Antoine was swallowing hard in his effort to continue his recital.

"You say an old lady, sir; the mistress is not really what you would call so old—not exactly, sir."

"Really a youngish party, I should say," volunteered Graves, the gardener.

Just what these veterans would call old was a matter of conjecture. "Um," I murmured, and considered the situation.

"Young or old, she would hardly relish her reception. There was a maid, and they came in a machine? Did you put up the chauffeur or did you shoot him on the spot?"

"It was a hired machine, sir; and madame sent it away. The driver was a good deal up-

set over the shooting. One of the rear tires was quite blown away."

"You're in luck if he doesn't have you all arrested to-morrow," I remarked consolingly.

"Mrs. Bashford seemed quite amused by the occurrence," Antoine continued. "'Wonderful America!' she kept saying after we'd got her inside. We gave her tea, which was all she asked for. She takes her tea with cream, sir. We did our best to make her comfortable. And there was a dog, sir. I recall that the master was not fond of dogs. There was never one on the place."

Antoine spoke truly; if there was anything my Uncle Bash detested it was a dog, but I reflected that a world-skipping widow who could corral so difficult a subject as my uncle would be quite capable of inspiring him with delight in the canine species. My respect for the woman's powers of persuasion was intensified by this disclosure.

She had failed to wire Torrence as she promised or he had neglected to warn me of her coming; either way it was a pretty kettle of fish, and I shuddered at the thought of facing her wholly pardonable indignation.

To make sure that nothing was required of me until morning, I drove past the house with the army hanging to the footboard. The lower rooms were dark, but lights twinkled through the second-story shutters. My aunt was established on the premises, and her coming and the circumstances of her advent constituted a good joke of which I and not she was the victim. When I reached my quarters in the garage I sat down and laughed until Flynn appeared, frightened by my noisy mirth that had penetrated to his quarters. I got rid of him and smoked a pipe and began the packing I meant to finish early in the morning.

I wakened early, rang a bell connecting my rooms with the chauffeur's end of the garage as a warning to the Flynns to prepare breakfast, and was dressed when the Irishman came in with the tray. In the absence of a morning paper I clung to him for company.

"I trust you will not be leaving, sorr," he remarked, eyeing my half-packed trunk.

"Very soon, Flynn."

"Then Elsie and I will be going too, sorr. It's most uncomfortable they're making us—

Dutch and the rest. That Antoine and his army keep pesterin' us and callin' us Huns."

"You raise a very interesting question, Flynn, a very delicate question of fact and propriety. Satisfied as you and Elsie are of your entire loyalty to the United States and the associated Powers, I think you should remain, a martyr, if need be, to the great cause of world democracy."

"It's most disagreeable we find it, the wife and me," he said mournfully.

"Suffer and be strong—that's the watchword! We will hope that Mrs. Bashford is a woman of sound sense and tact who will exert herself to restore peace on her property. When I call to pay my respects and make my adieus I shall speak to her of the situation and vouch for your loyalty. You may count on me. You haven't, I suppose, seen the widow yet—she's probably sleeping late."

"Quite the contrary, sorr. She's been up and around for an hour an' more. She's been all over the place and stopped for a squint at the garage, her and the pup."

"She's been here, inspecting the garage?" I asked, glancing at my watch. It was not yet

eight o'clock. The banter died out of me; clearly it had been my duty to be on hand to pilot her over the estate, or at least to receive her at the garage. "Just what was the lady's frame of mind—as to things generally. Peeved, was she, over the row last night?"

"Oh, no, sorr; quite cheerful an' friendly. She's ordered a big car from New York and told me it would be coming up to-day and to make a place for it."

Here was news indeed, destroying all my hopes that she meditated only a brief sojourn. The purchase of a machine meant definitely that she would remain for some time, perhaps for the winter. I poured a second cup of coffee, swallowed it, grabbed my hat and stick, and asked enlightment as to the course taken by Mrs. Bashford when she left the garage.

"She took the lower road, sorr, toward the Sound and stepped off quite brisk-like."

It was the serenest of September mornings, and I hurried away, thinking the cloudless blue arch, the twinkling sea, and the crisp air might serve to soften my aunt's displeasure at her hostile reception. From the con-

servatories I caught a glimpse of a woman on the beach—a slender, agile woman throwing a ball for the amusement of a fox-terrier. She threw the ball with a boy's free swing, occasionally varying a hot one down the shore with a toss high in air which she caught up herself before the terrier could reach it. The two were having no end of a good time. She laughed joyfully when the ball fell into her hands and the terrier barked his discomfiture and eagerness for a chance to redeem himself.

Antoine's equivocal statement as to Mrs. Bashford's age was ridiculous. Instead of the middle-aged woman whom I was prepared to meet, here was beyond question a vigorous, healthy being whose every movement spoke for youth and the joy of life. It might, after all, be the maid of whom Antoine had spoken; I advanced slowly, anxious not to break in upon her romp with the terrier—they made a charming picture—and trying to formulate an introduction. I reached a low stone wall that separated the lawn from the beach just as she effected a running pick-up of the ball. She turned swiftly and flung it straight at my

head. Involuntarily I put up my hand and caught it just as she saw me and cried out—a cry of warning and contrition. I tossed the ball to the dog.

"What must you think of me!" she exclaimed. "I was blinded by the sunlight and I didn't see you—really I did not!"

"I had no business being in the way," I laughed, noting first her glowing color, her violet eyes—amazingly fine eyes they were—her fair hair with its golden glint, her plain black gown with lawn collar and wristbands. It was her age, however, that roused me to instant speculation. Twenty-five, I decided, was a maximum; more likely she was not more than twenty-two, and if I had been told that eighteen was the total of her years I shouldn't have had the heart to dispute it.

"Bob Singleton," I said and stupidly added, "and you are Mrs. Bashford?" unable for the life of me to avoid turning the statement into an inquiry.

"I am your aunt Alice," she said with a smile, putting out her hand. "Down, Rex!" she commanded the dancing terrier; "lie down; school's over now"; whereupon Rex

obediently sprawled in the sand and began trying to swallow the ball.

"Wasn't that silly of me to try to kill you the first time we met!" Her eyes danced with merriment. "I didn't know, of course, that any one was about. But you made a very nice catch of it! I had expected to receive you most formally in the drawing-room, but this really serves very well. That tree down yonder is inviting; suppose we stay out here and talk a bit."

This struck me as the pleasantest thing imaginable, though I was still dazed and my tongue seemed to have died in my mouth. This girl, this wholly charming and delightful young woman, was the monstrous being I had conjectured as the globe-trotting widow who had kidnapped and married my uncle! Not only had she married my uncle Bash and in due course buried him; she had been a widow when she married him! I furtively studied her face—a face that invited scrutiny—and her candid eyes that met my gaze of wonder and frank admiration easily and without a trace of self-consciousness. On the third finger of her left hand was a slender

band of gold. The thing was staggering, bewildering. She was clearly anxious to be friendly, but nothing that I had thought of saying to her fitted the situation.

"In the first place," I finally began, "I must apologize most humbly for the earnest efforts of the servants to murder you last night. Mr. Torrence had promised to let me know when you would reach here, but he must have forgotten it. I had motored to a friend's house to dine and didn't get back until the mischief was done. I'm very sorry. You must have thought you had driven into a camp of savages!"

"Not for worlds would I have missed that," she exclaimed with a merry laugh. "It was perfectly delicious! And it was all my fault. I meant to remain a day at Hartford, you know, and send a message to Mr. Torrence from there, but I found that by pushing on I could reach here yesterday. Then the machine I hired showed every weakness that motors are subject to and we were hours later than the Hartford garage man promised. And you know we English always expect strange things to happen in America. I don't under-

stand yet why those people at the gates were so jolly anxious to kill us; but it doesn't matter; you would only spoil the joke by explaining it."

However, I did my best—it was a weak attempt—to explain the nervousness of the veteran servants and their display of violence. Her arrival made it likely that we should soon know more about the "parties" whose visits and inquiries had so alarmed Antoine and his comrades. Now that I saw Mrs. Bashford the idea that any one could entertain malevolent designs upon her was more preposterous than ever, and I resolved that she must be shielded from annoyances of every kind. I told her with all the humor I could throw into the recital of the drilling of the bell-hops and of the uncomfortable relations between the Allied forces and the Teutonic minority on the estate.

"It was dear of Mr. Bashford to provide a home for these people; wasn't he really the kindest soul that ever lived?" she said softly.

She gazed wistfully seaward, and I saw the gleam of tears on her long lashes. My uncle had, then, meant something to her! No one,

in speech or manner, could have suggested the adventuress less; Uncle Bash was a gentleman, a man of æsthetic tastes, and the girl was adorable. More remarkable things had happened in the history of love and marriage than that two such persons, meeting in a far corner of the world, would honestly care for each other. My respect for Uncle Bash grew; he had married the most attractive girl in the world, and here she was with the bloom of her girlhood upon her, tripping alone through a world that might have been created merely that she might confer light and cheer upon it.

"You stopped at Hartford," I began, breaking a long silence. "You have friends there——?"

"Not one! I had made a pious pilgrimage to Mark Twain's last home at Redding, and, hearing that he had lived at Hartford, I came through there to render my fullest homage. He has always been one of my heroes, you know." She laughingly lifted her hands and counted upon her fingers—"'The Jumping Frog,' Tom and Huck, and 'Mulberry Sellers,' 'The Prince and the Pauper,' and 'Pudd'n-head Wilson'! I know them all by heart!"

"Our introduction is complete," I said reverently. "Let's consider ourselves old friends."

"I rather thought we'd understand each other," she said in her even, mellow tones. "You know, we had your photograph out East—a very good one, it seems—so I had an idea of what you looked like."

"The photograph gave you an unfair advantage! And I didn't know Uncle Bash carried one away with him."

"He was very fond of you," she said gravely. "He was very proud that you had gone into the war."

"I am glad to hear that; I thought he disapproved of me for refusing to go into business. He offered me a substantial interest before he sold out."

"I know that; but I think he liked you rather better for refusing it. Business with him was merely a means to an end. And it was doubly sad that he should die just when he was free to enjoy the beautiful things he loved."

It was at the tip of my tongue to say that the loss of her companionship was even more grievous; but nothing in her manner invited

such a comment. Her grave moods were to be respected, and she talked for some time of Uncle Bash's life in the East, of his short illness and quite unexpected death.

"But I'm keeping you," she exclaimed suddenly, jumping down from the wall. "And I must finish my unpacking."

As we walked to the house I answered her questions about the neighborhood, and promised to telephone Torrence immediately of her arrival.

"You will have luncheon with us—or maybe dinner would be better—or both? Antoine told me of your bachelor establishment, but eating alone is bad for the digestion. I shall think you resent my coming if you don't dine at the house every day. Mrs. Farnsworth—my friend and companion—is a very interesting woman. I am sure you will like her."

The information that she was protected in her youthful widowhood by a companion was imparted neatly.

"It was really much nicer, meeting this way," she said, giving me her hand. "We shall expect you at seven."

I found them on the veranda, which had

been transformed since my last glimpse of it. Rugs, wicker furniture, wall-pockets of flowers, and paper lanterns dropped over the electric lights gave it the appearance of a prettily set scene. She came toward me, a slender figure in white. She seemed taller in white; as she took a few steps toward me, I was aware of a stateliness I had missed at the shore. A queenly young person, but as unaffectedly cordial and friendly as in the bright morning sunlight.

"Mrs. Farnsworth, Mr. Singleton."

Mrs. Farnsworth was a pleasant-faced, white-haired woman with remarkably fine, dark eyes. If the positions had been changed —if Mrs. Farnsworth had been my uncle's choice of a wife, the situation would have been much more real. I instantly liked Mrs. Farnsworth. She uttered a few commonplaces in an uncommonplace tone without pausing in her knitting. Mrs. Bashford had been knitting too, and as she sat down she took up her yarn and needles. It was a sweater, I think; it doesn't matter. What matters is that her hands moved swiftly and deftly. Her manner of knitting was charming: She knew that I

was watching her hands and remarked with a graceful turn of the head:

"For an English boy somewhere! I began by knitting for my brother and cousins, but" —her head bent lower—"that isn't for me to do any more." Her eyes, turned upon me for a moment, were bright with tears.

I was speaking of the splendid valor of Englishmen I had known in France when Antoine announced dinner.

It had been years since the house had known a woman's hand, and it was astonishing how humanized it had become in a few hours. The long dining-room, always a bare, forbidding place, had been reduced to cosey proportions by screens, and a small round table replaced the massive, oblong affair that always looked as though it had been built into the house by the carpenters.

"I found those lovely screens in the garret and thought we might as well enjoy them, and that Lang Yao jar you see on the sideboard oughtn't to be hidden in the vault."

"I am sure Uncle Bash would be happy to know you care for these things so much," I said, noting that the white roses she had

chosen for the jar—I knew the choice was hers—served to emphasize the deep red of its exquisite glaze.

"I am among the unelect," remarked Mrs. Farnsworth. "When I am told that such things are beautiful I am immediately convinced. I say they are beautiful, and that is enough."

"That has always been enough for me," I replied. "My uncle used to try to interest me, and I wore out a good many pairs of shoes following him through museums and salesrooms, but he gave me up when he found that my pagan soul was aroused by nothing but pottery idols. It wasn't the pottery that interested me even there, but only the ugliest designs. I am a heathen!"

"I am gratified that you make the admission so frankly," said Mrs. Farnsworth. "I have always been a great admirer of the heathen."

"I like them when they are nice," said Mrs. Bashford.

"Yes; I have found you very discriminating in your choice of the species, Alice. But, you know, Mr. Singleton, Alice and I never

can agree as to just what a heathen is. All our squabbles have been about that. The old hymn pictured the heathen in his blindness bowing down to wood and stone; but I'm disposed to broaden my definition to include all who believe in fairies good or bad, and persons who honestly believe in signs, omens, and lucky stones and all who have the receipt of fern-seed and walk invisible—there's Shakespeare for that. Some very good Christians are also very nice heathens: we mustn't be narrow and bigoted about such things."

"I think," said Mrs. Bashford soberly, "that I have always believed in witches; and if I keep on believing I shall see one some day. We shall find anything in this world that we believe in hard enough. Now a witch —the kind of witch I have always expected to wake up and find flourishing a broom at me from the foot of my bed——"

She was talking very gravely, as though witches were the commonest topic of conversation, but finding my eyes turned upon her in frank wonder, she laughed at my amazement.

"Let us be honest with you, Mr. Singleton," Mrs. Farnsworth explained, "and tell you that we are just testing you. It may be a breach of hospitality, and you are all but a stranger, but we are curious to know whether you are of that small company of the favored of heaven who can play at being foolish without becoming idiotic. Alice is sometimes very near idiocy. You admit that, Alice!"

"I not only admit it, but I might even boast of it!" my aunt replied.

At the mention of witches I had caught Antoine crossing himself as he turned to the sideboard. I confess that I myself had been startled by the drift of the talk. Mrs. Farnsworth was far from being the grim duenna I had feared might be my aunt's chaperon, and there was certainly nothing in her appearance to suggest that she was a believer in witches. She and my aunt treated each other as though they were contemporaries, and it was Alice and Constance between them. As the talk ran exhaustively through the lore of witches and goblins I had hoped that one or the other would drop some clew as to the previous history of my amazing aunt. It was as plain as

day that she and Mrs. Farnsworth indulged in whims for the joy of it, and her zest in the discussion of witches, carried on while Antoine served the table, lips tightly compressed, and with an exaggeration of his stately tread, was the more startling from the fact that my aunt's companion was a woman of years, a handsome woman with a high-bred air who did not look at all like a person who would discuss witches as though they had been made the topic of the day by the afternoon newspapers. And when the shape of a witch's chin became the immediate point of discussion I knew it was in Antoine's mind that such conversation was unbecoming, an offense to the memory of Raymond Bashford. Mrs. Farnsworth's brown eyes sparkled, and the color deepened in my aunt's cheeks as we discoursed upon witches and the chins thereof. I had a friend in college who used to indulge in the same sort of piffling, but that my uncle's widow and her elderly companion should delight in such absurdities bewildered me. I had been addressing my aunt as Mrs. Bashford—it seemed ridiculous to call her Aunt Alice—and in the heat of our argument as to

whether witches are necessarily naughty and malign beings I had just uttered the "Mrs." when she bent toward me and said gravely and with no hint of archness: "Can't we make it Alice and Bob? I think that would be a lot friendlier."

I experienced a curious flutter of the heart the first time I tried it, but after that it came very easily. I found it impossible to think of her in terms of auntship, and it was a relief to have the relationship waived. She was simply the jolliest, prettiest girl that had ever crossed my horizon, and to be talking to her across the table gave me thrills compared with which sliding out of clouds in an airplane is only a rocking-chair pastime for old men.

The veteran chef of the Tyringham had produced an excellent dinner, though the witch talk made Antoine a trifle nervous in serving it.

We had coffee on the veranda (Alice thought it would be nicer there), and as Antoine gave me my cup he edged close to my chair to whisper:

"That party, sir. If he should come——"

"Tell the troops not to attack any visitors,"

I said, loud enough for the others to hear. "Mr. Torrence will be here shortly, and it would be annoying to have him ushered in on a shutter. We must establish a rule that callers are not to be fired upon at the gate."

"I know why this is the land of the free and the home of the brave," laughed Alice. "One has to be brave to live here."

Antoine departed with a resentful twist of the shoulders, and I decided to meet squarely the matter of the visitors who had so troubled him.

"Please don't be frightened," I said as lightly as possible, "but these old fellows haven't enough to do, and they are full of apprehensions. With nobody here to keep them busy it's remarkable they haven't found a ghost."

"If they only would!" murmured Mrs. Farnsworth.

"No such luck! They have been alarmed by an agent of some sort who wants to welcome you to America by selling you a piano on easy payments."

Antoine had been hovering inside, and my remark brought him to the door.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Singleton, but that party is not an agent, but quite different, sir. He came to the house, quite like a gentleman, several times, and asked if Mrs. Bashford had arrived. He came in a big car, and seemed disappointed, madame, that you were not here and not expected. The second time he said he was just passing on his way to the city and thought he would stop again. A very well-spoken gentleman, and we'd have thought nothing of it except that a few days later I caught a man I was sure was the same party, but dressed in rough clothes, sneaking across the veranda right there where you're sitting. When I called to him he ran as hard as he could, and Graves —he's the vegetable-gardener—saw him leaving the property by the back way."

"It's hardly possible that a man who impressed you as a gentleman when you saw him at the door should have returned in disguise and tried to break into the house. The two things don't hang together, Antoine."

"Oh," exclaimed Mrs. Farnsworth, "it would be so much more delightful if that were

true! Any one in disguise is bound to be interesting. A disguise suggests most beautiful possibilities. And to be sought, asked for by a stranger!"

I could not be sure in the dim light of the veranda, but I thought I detected a white slipper cautiously reach out and touch a black one. At any rate, Mrs. Farnsworth lapsed into silence.

"Thank you very much, Antoine," said Alice. "It is very proper for you to tell me anything of any stranger on the property, but I see nothing here to be alarmed about. If the same gentleman calls again, let me know instantly."

"Very good, madame." And then, turning as though conferring upon me a part of his responsibility for the security of the premises: "It's a party with a limp; just a trifling limp, sir; you'd hardly notice it. It was worse the last time as he ran away. A smallish man, rather dark, with a little mustache turned up at the ends."

"I have noted all these details, Antoine," I replied; and again I thought there was a telegraphic exchange between the ladies,

though this time a black slipper was the means of communication.

Torrence arrived in a moment, and nothing has ever given me keener joy than his shock of surprise at beholding Mrs. Bashford. As I introduced the ladies he was so overcome that he greeted Mrs. Farnsworth as Mrs. Bashford—a not unnatural mistake—and there was an embarrassing moment as I set him right. Having done this, I seated myself beside Mrs. Farnsworth that Torrence might be free to talk business with my aunt. I was devoutly grateful that he had not been present at the dinner-table, for my own efforts to interest Torrence in anything but the most practical matters had always been highly unsuccessful, and the discussion of ghosts and witches would hardly have amused him. As Mrs. Farnsworth and I took up the recent movements on the western front I overheard Torrence putting all the machinery of the trust company at Mrs. Bashford's disposal. It seemed almost a blasphemy to be talking of income and like matters to a woman like Alice Bashford!

They continued their conference for some time, but I got nothing out of Mrs. Farns-

worth that shed any light on my aunt's history beyond what she had told me herself, which was precious little. Mrs. Farnsworth's talk was that of a cultivated woman. Her voice interested me unaccountably; the tones had all manner of shadings and inflections; it was curiously musical, but in speaking of the great war a passionate note crept into it that stirred me deeply.

"This has been a dark year for Alice," she remarked. "Mr. Bashford's death, followed quickly by that of her brother—an only son—piled a cruel burden of grief upon the dear child. She wants to go back to England to nurse the wounded, to do anything for our dear country, but I want to keep her here a little while until she can readjust herself. You must not think, Mr. Singleton, that she has no feeling; you have no idea of the depths of that child's nature; they are unfathomable! It is my task to encourage her in frivolity and the make-believe she loves—hence our absurdities at the table. She's the drollest child, but with wonderful understanding. And at times it's not easy to keep the divine spark of play alive in her heart."

The light of one of the porch lamps fell

upon Alice's face as she patiently gave heed to Torrence's account of his stewardship. One of her hands gently stroked the terrier that lay quietly in a chair beside her. I was sure that his painstaking description of assets and market values was boring her. Once her voice rose in expostulation. Torrence, I judged, was suggesting that legal means could be found to expel the old Tyringham employees from the Barton property.

"Oh, never in the world! It was quite like Mr. Bashford to want to care for these people in their old age. And"—she laughed and turned toward me—"they can't be dislodged while Bob lives; and we don't want to part with him just yet."

I was glad to have him hear her address me in this intimate fashion. Torry always inspired in me a desire to shock him. He was trying to assure Alice that his only concern was to make her comfortable; he wished to save her from every annoyance and that sort of thing.

"I shall help Alice to break them in, Torry," I said, lingering upon her name for his special edification.

"Of course, Singleton," he replied. "I wasn't sure you meant to stay on. Pardon me, but I didn't——"

"Oh, it isn't that Bob hasn't a right to stay," said Alice quickly; "Mrs. Farnsworth and I are hoping that he will like us well enough to share our exile on other accounts. We are so unfamiliar with everything American that it would be most unkind for him to desert us."

"I am engaging Mr. Singleton to explain American jokes to me," announced Mrs. Farnsworth. "Alice seems to get them, but I'm never sure."

It is a part of Torrence's business to counsel widows, which he does like the honorable man he is, but as he rose to go presently, remarking that his wife would motor down to call shortly, I caught a glimpse of his face that indicated deep perplexity. I wanted to warn him that Alice Bashford was not an ordinary widow, who vexes officers of trust companies with foolish questions and is prone to overdraw her account, so I left when he did.

"I want to talk to you," he said nervously

when we were outside. "I'll send the car ahead to the gate."

When the shrubbery cut us off from the house he stopped abruptly and seized my arm. "What do you make of it?" he demanded.

"Make of what?" I asked.

"That girl!" he exclaimed testily.

"If you insist, I must avow that she's adorable, nothing else."

"Don't be a fool! You knew Raymond Bashford much better than I did, and you know perfectly well he never married a young girl of that sort! Those women are playing a trick, and I'm surprised that you don't see through it."

"My uncle was a man of taste and a gentleman," I answered deliberately. "There's nothing in the least improbable in his being infatuated with a young woman of charm and wit like this girl. And it is hardly profitable or decent to speculate as to her interest in him. You mustn't forget that Uncle Bash was an unusual man, a man with whom a young girl might easily fall in love without reference to his age or money or anything else."

"I tell you it won't do," he insisted. "If either of those women at the house is Raymond Bashford's widow, it's the one who calls herself Farnsworth."

"You did your best to convict them of fraud the first jump out of the box," I said, laughing at the recollection of his confusion when I introduced him.

"My mistake was a natural one," he said defensively. "They're playing a game of some kind and it's no laughing matter, but it won't take long to find out what they're up to."

"You'll hardly go the length of having them arrested as imposters, Torrence—not without some data to work on!"

"Certainly not. You seem to be hitting it off with both of them, but I advise you to be on guard. Are you sure your uncle never sent you his wife's photograph? That would have been a perfectly natural thing to do."

"If I'd got a photograph, I should have headed for Japan, not for France." I laughed, but I was thinking deeply. His line of reasoning as to the incongruity of the marriage was not so different from my own that I could

sneer at his suspicions. Very convincingly, as became a practical-minded man, he expanded his views as to the unlikelihood of my uncle's marrying a girl but little beyond school age. I shrank from telling him that I didn't care a hang whether the widow was a fraud or not. If the two women who had settled themselves on the Barton estate were imposters, they were extraordinarily daring and clever. My attitude toward them was wholly defensive. If women of their quality were perpetrating a fraud, I was for giving them every chance, and I had no intention of allowing Torrence to spoil the unfolding of the conspiracy.

We were nearing a gateway where his car waited, and I saw several of the guard hanging about at a discreet distance. "Look here, Singleton," he said angrily, "you don't seem to take this business very seriously. You don't want to make the mistake of letting a pretty girl pull the wool over your eyes. If we're not careful, we're all of us likely to get into trouble." He lowered his voice and added tensely: "Those women are under suspicion of something more serious than an at-

tempt to rob an estate. An agent of the American State Department called on me yesterday and asked embarrassing questions about Mrs. Bashford. Not a Secret Service man, you understand, or anything of that kind, but an important man in the State Department."

"Of course you knew nothing to tell," I suggested as he beat the walk impatiently with his stick.

"I took a chance at lying to him about her expected arrival. I thought it only decent to have a look at the woman first. He told me nothing except that the British Embassy had made inquiries and that the matter was delicate and must be handled carefully."

"Was this inquirer lame—a small dark man with a black mustache?" I asked, suddenly interested. "Such a person has been hanging about here, so the boys tell me?"

"Not at all! I may as well tell you it was Raynor—you probably remember him. He's a specialist in international law, and they took him into the State Department just after the *Lusitania* business. He's a gentleman and a good fellow—I've played golf with

him a good deal—and I hated to lie to him. Of course, with the whole United States back of him he can pursue his inquiries without my help; but I thought I'd see this woman before telling him she had reached America."

I confess that I was a trifle dismayed by this. Raynor I knew slightly. Professionally and socially he stood high, and even without the prestige of his official position he was not a chap to sneeze at; but I didn't want Torrence to know I had any doubts as to the perfect authenticity of my uncle's widow.

"Oh, every transcontinental pilgrim is probably scrutinized closely these days," I remarked carelessly. "Mrs. Bashford has lost a brother in the war, and I haven't heard any one talk more bitterly against Germany. And her companion certainly has no illusions about the Kaiser. You'd have to show me the proof to make me believe we're harboring spies."

"I don't like the business," he declared stubbornly.

"Let's do nothing foolish," I insisted. "If Raynor has reason to suspect either or both of these women, we'll hear further from him."

"I've put myself in a hole," he said angrily. "Of course I've got to advise him immediately that Mrs. Bashford is here. I promised to let him know as soon as I heard from her."

"Just wait a few days; I undertake to keep them under surveillance; you can put the whole responsibility on me. If they attempt to leave, I'll warn you and Raynor instantly, but they have settled themselves as though they expected to spend the rest of their lives here. Remembering your visit the other night, you ought to be satisfied with the policing of the place!"

I told him of Mrs. Bashford's adventures in reaching the house without convincing him that there was anything funny in her experiences, and he left on my promise to report to him daily at a given hour and instantly if anything unusual occurred. I waited for the guards to lock the gates and bade them keep watch every night until further orders, and was on my way back through the grounds when Antoine arrested me.

"Pardon me, but I'd like to ask what you think of it, sir?" he asked hoarsely, falling into step.

"If you mean what do I think of Mrs. Bashford," I replied sharply, "I think she's quite charming and delightful and all any one could ask in every way."

"It's her manner of speaking of spookish things, Mr. Singleton. It doesn't seem fitting in a widow and her so lately bereaved. And the older lady's quite as bad, sir. The maids tell me they keep talking all day about fairies and pretending they're queens and such like, and talking poetry to each other."

"Quoting poetry is a harmless amusement, Antoine, and believing in fairies and goblins is no crime. Such pastimes argue for sweetness and innocence of character."

"But the late master never indulged in such things, sir."

"He would have lived longer if he had! It was probably the poetry and fairies that attracted him to Mrs. Bashford."

"Yes, sir," he acquiesced with a gulp. "I suppose you're right, sir."

"You should be grateful to Mrs. Bashford for not bouncing you all for the row you made last night. It could be done; in fact, Mr. Torrence has suggested that legal means could be found for getting rid of you."

"That would be very sad, sir," he said humbly.

"Isn't Mrs. Bashford kind to you? Hasn't she taken pains to make you all feel at home?"

"Well, yes, sir. But she's taken Elsie back into the house, and there's no work for her, there being two women in the laundry already; and she's told me Dutch must be given his old place in charge of the poultry; and both being Germans, you will recall."

"It's just her kind heart, you idiot! You've all been spoiled; that's what's the matter with you. Elsie and Dutch are as law-abiding and honest as the best of you."

"It causes feeling; that's all, sir."

"It needn't cause it if you brace up and act like a man," I retorted. Then, sorry I had been so harsh, I added: "We must take good care of Mrs. Bashford, Antoine. It would be your old master's wish. It will do no harm to keep a guard at the house for the present in case your mysterious stranger turns up again."

He couldn't have failed to note my change of tone about the unknown visitor, but he made no comment.

"The guard's set, sir; front and rear."

"While there's no danger whatever it's just as well to take no chances. Please tell the boys to send for me immediately at any hour of the night if they see any prowlers about."

"Very good, sir. But if you please, sir"—he had reached the garage and he lingered, fingering his hat nervously—"if it wasn't for the ladies talking about spirits, we'd all feel better, sir. It's creepy, sir, all the talk about witches and ghosts, no matter what names you call 'em by."

"You're far from being a fool, Antoine. Those ladies just play at believing in such rubbish. If they really believed in ghosts, you may be sure they wouldn't talk about it at table before strangers like you and me."

Though this seemed to impress him, a moment later, as I was drawing down the shades in my bedroom, I saw him running across the lawn like a frightened rabbit.

CHAPTER III

A FAN

THE morning mail brought a letter from Searles acknowledging my congratulations on his play. While my enthusiastic praise pleased him, he was very scornful of my suggestions about available stars, and seemed even more depressed than when he talked to me.

"It's impossible for me to plan other work. 'Lady Larkspur' ate the soul out of me. I'm done; finished, clean out of the running. There's only this to report. I had a letter from Dalton saying that some time ago he asked at the hotel where he sent the script of 'Lady Larkspur' to know whether Miss Dewing had sent a forwarding address. He had to see the manager before he got any satisfaction, but he did learn that her accumulated mail had been called for by some one whose identity was not disclosed. Of course this isn't much to hang a hope on, but if that play is what I think it is and Miss

Violet Dewing ever reads it she's going to jump for the telegraph office the moment she finishes the last act. I have no plans for returning East; the folks at home let me do as I please, and it's a relief to be in seclusion where I hear nothing of the doings of Broadway. I hope your ancient globe-trotting aunt still lingers in the Far East! Keep the ink flowing, son. That novel ought to be well under way when I get back."

The tale I had begun seemed utter trash in comparison with the story of Alice Bashford, in which, much against my will, I had become a minor character. I had rather prided myself on my ability to see through a plot in the first chapter of the most complicated mystery story, but there were points in this unwritten tale that baffled me.

I kept away from the house until dinnertime, when I was received quite as an old friend by Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth. The table talk was of Celtic poetry, and proved less disturbing to Antoine than the previous night's discussion of ghosts.

Their day had been spent, they explained, in a further examination of my uncle's Japa-

nese loot, and they had taken a long walk beyond the estate's boundaries and were enthusiastic about the landscape.

"It's so beautifully peaceful all about here," Alice murmured. "I feel that I never want to move again."

"That's a real tribute to America," Mrs. Farnsworth remarked; "for Alice dearly loves new scenes. She inherited a taste for travel from her father, who put some new places on the maps, you know."

I didn't know and I wanted to ask questions about Alice's father, but as though anxious to frustrate such inquiries my aunt asked how close we were to the place made famous by Israel Putnam's spectacular escape from the British. She had read the story and would motor to the scene, she declared. It was quite clear that there were chapters in her life that were not to be opened for my perusal. No sooner had I caught a glimpse of a promising page than the book was politely closed. A curtain hung between the immediate present at Barton-on-the-Sound and other scenes and incidents of the girl's life; and Mrs. Farnsworth was equally detached

from any tangible background. It seemed that I might meet them daily for the rest of my life in this same friendly fashion without adding a particle to my knowledge of them.

I became alert immediately when, as we rose from the table, Alice said, with the air of asking an unimportant favor:

"We were speaking last night of a man who has been asking for us here. His visits have alarmed the servants, but there is nothing to fear from him. You know"—she smiled at Mrs. Farnsworth—"it's rather he who seems to fear us; that, at least, is our impression, though we have no idea why he should do so. Still, it's rather good fun to find yourself an object of special attention and to be followed, even pursued. We've even led him on a little, haven't we, Constance?"

Mrs. Farnsworth laughingly admitted that they had led the gentleman on a trifle, "but with all circumspection," she protested.

"We met him here and there in Tokyo, and later were surprised to find him crossing on our steamer. We threw him off in the Canadian Rockies, where we stopped for a day,

and eluded him in Chicago, where he was evidently lying in wait for us."

"Delightful!" I exclaimed.

"But please don't get the idea that the man annoys us," interposed Mrs. Farnsworth.

"Far from it!" cried Alice.

"You've seen enough of us perhaps to understand that we enjoy little adventures," said Mrs. Farnsworth. "The man pretends to be interested in Mr. Bashford's art treasures. Antoine's story about the disguise is rather against that; but we will give him the benefit of the doubt. What we are hoping is that something really amusing may come of his persistent pursuit. With you and the army of servants here we feel perfectly safe; so we're for giving him every chance to show his hand."

"He is the Count Giuseppe Montani," said my aunt, "who represents himself as a connoisseur—a lover of the beautiful."

"The mystery is solved! It is easy to understand why he has haunted the place."

"Yes; quite easy. Count Montani is very anxious to see the porcelains."

"I wasn't referring to the pottery; but I shan't press the matter."

"I advise you not to; your remark was highly improper from a nephew to an aunt! I have told you about all I know of this Italian gentleman. I am going to ask a favor. He telephoned from Stamford this afternoon to know whether we had arrived, and I bade him call to-night. I should be glad if you would remain until he leaves. I should like to know what you make of him."

"Certainly," I assented, pleased that she had taken me into her confidence and deeply curious as to the Italian connoisseur. What she had told so frankly and plausibly did not, however, touch upon the matter of the interest shown by the American State Department in my aunt's arrival at Barton, which troubled me much more than the antics of the Italian who had followed the women across the Pacific.

Count Montani arrived shortly and was received in the drawing-room. The ladies greeted him with the greatest cordiality. As he crossed the room I verified the limp and other points of Antoine's description. His bearing was that of a gentleman; and in his very correct evening dress he hardly looked

like a man who would disguise himself and attempt to rob a house. He spoke English all but perfectly and proceeded at once to talk a great deal.

"I was sad when I found I had so narrowly missed you at Seattle, and again at Chicago. You travel far too rapidly for one of my age!"

His age might have been thirty. He was a suave, polished, sophisticated person. Nothing was more natural than that he should pause in his travels to call upon two agreeable women he had met on a Pacific steamer. Possibly he was in love with Alice Bashford; this was not a difficult state of heart and mind for a man to argue himself into. She was even more strikingly beautiful to-night than I had thought her before. She was again in white—it was only in daytime that she wore black—and white was exceedingly becoming to her. As we talked she plied listlessly a fan—a handsome trinket of ostrich plumes. A pretty woman and a fan are the happiest possible combination. There is no severer test of grace than a woman's manner of using a fan. A clumsy woman

makes an implement of this plaything, flourishing it to emphasize her talk, or, what is worse, pointing with it like an instructor before a blackboard. But in graceful hands it is unobtrusive, a mere bit of decoration that teases and fascinates the beholder's eye.

With all his poise and equanimity I was distinctly conscious that Montani's dark eyes were intent upon the idly swaying fan. I thought at first it was her hands that interested him as they unfailingly interested me, but when, from time to time, she put down the fan his gaze still followed it. And yet there was nothing novel in the delicate combination of ivory and feathers. I had seen many fans that to all appearances were just like it. Once, as she picked it up and lazily opened it, I saw him bend forward eagerly, then, finding that I had noted his eagerness, he rose, pretending that a brass screen before the fireplace had caught his eye and asked whether it was not a Florentine production, which shook my faith in his connoisseurship, as I had bought the thing myself from a New York brassworker who had made it to my order.

Montani spoke of the porcelains. "Oh, to be sure! They don't show to best advantage in electric light, do they? But I can have a few of the prize pieces taken into the dining-room," said Alice.

Mrs. Farnsworth had excused herself to finish a letter, and from my chair I could see her head bent over the big desk in the library. Alice rang for Antoine, and I followed her into the hall to offer my aid.

"Oh, don't trouble," she said. "Antoine can do anything necessary. Yes; thanks; if you will turn on the dining-room lights."

I was gone hardly half a minute. When I reached the drawing-room door Montani had crossed the room to the table on which Alice had dropped the fan and was examining it closely. He faced the door, and the moment he detected me exclaimed carelessly: "An exquisite little bauble! I am always curious as to the source of such trifles. I was looking for the maker's imprimatur. I know a Parisian who is the leading manufacturer of the world. But it is not his, I see."

As we stood talking of other things he plied the fan carelessly as though for the

pleasure of the faint scent it exhaled, and when Alice called us he put it down carefully where he had found it.

He really did seem to know something about ceramics and praised, with lively enthusiasm, the pieces that had been set out on the table. One piece, as to whose authenticity my uncle had entertained serious doubts, Montani unhesitatingly pronounced genuine and stated very plausible reasons for his opinion.

On the whole, he was an interesting fellow. When he had finished his inspections he lingered for only a few minutes and took his leave, saying that he was spending the night at an inn near Stamford.

"Well," said Alice when the whir of his machine had died away, "what do you think of him?"

"A very agreeable gentleman," I answered. "If he doesn't know porcelains, he fakes his talk admirably."

"And as to fans—" suggested Mrs. Farnsworth.

I had not intended to mention Montani's interest in Alice's fan, and the remark surprised me.

"Oh, I saw it all from the library," laughed Mrs. Farnsworth. "My back was to the door, but I was facing a mirror. The moment you and Alice went into the hall he pounced upon the fan—pounced is the only word that describes it. He concealed his interest in it very neatly when you caught him examining it."

"Fans are harmless things," said Alice, "and if there's any story attached to this one I'm not aware of it. My father bought it in Paris about three years ago, and it has never been out of my possession except to have it repaired. There's a Japanese jeweller who does wonderful things in the way of repairing trinkets of every kind. I left it with him for a few days. I can't tell now which panel was broken, he did his work so deftly."

I took it from her and balanced it in my fingers. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship with the simplest carvings on the ivory panels.

"He couldn't have seen it anywhere before to-night," observed Alice musingly. "In fact, I hadn't used it at all for a year. It was really by mistake that my maid put it into my trunk when I went to Japan. I didn't

want to risk breaking it again, so I've been carrying it in a hand-bag. The last day we were in Tokyo I think I had it in our sitting-room in the hotel, to make sure it wasn't jammed into the trunk again. We had a good many callers—a number of people came in to bid us good-by, but I'm sure Count Montani was not among them, and it would have been impossible for him to see it at any other time."

"Oh, there is nothing disturbing in the count's interest in the thing," said Mrs. Farnsworth with an air of dismissing the matter. "If it were a jade trinket inscribed with Chinese mysteries, you might imagine that it would be sought by some one—I have heard of such things—but Alice's fan has no such history."

"We weren't very hospitable," said Alice. "I might have asked Count Montani to dine with us to-morrow; and we might even have put him up for the night in this vast house."

"Not with Antoine on the premises!" I exclaimed. "Antoine is convinced that the man is what we call in America a crook. And

Antoine takes his responsibilities very seriously."

While I was breakfasting at the garage the next morning Antoine appeared and, waiting until Flynn was out of hearing, handed me a slip of paper.

"That's a New York automobile number," he said. "It was on the tag of that machine the party came in last night. I heard him saying, sir, as how he had motored up from the Elkton Inn at Stamford. Visitors from Stamford would hardly send in to the city for a machine."

I bade him wait while I called the Elkton by telephone. No such person as Giuseppe Montani had spent the night there or had been a guest of the house within the memory of the clerk. Antoine's chest swelled at this confirmation of his suspicions.

"If the man returns, treat him as you did last night—as though he were entitled to the highest consideration."

"He won't come back—not the same way," said Antoine. "He mentioned the Elkton just to throw you off. The next you hear of him will be quite different."

"You mean he'll come as a burglar?"

"That's what's in my mind, Mr. Singleton. Everything seems very queer, sir."

"Such as what, Antoine?"

"The widow has been telegraphing and telephoning considerable, sir."

"There must be no spying upon these ladies!" I admonished severely. "All the people on the place must remember that Mrs. Bashford is mistress here, and entitled to fullest respect."

He had hardly gone before Torrence had me on the wire to hear my report and to say that Raynor had left Washington for a week-end in Virginia.

"That lets us out for a few days, but I'll have to report that Mrs. Bashford is at Barton the moment I learn that he is back in Washington."

I assured him that nothing had occurred to encourage a suspicion that Mrs. Bashford was not all that she pretended to be. The day was marked by unusual activities on the part of the waiters and bell-hops. Instead of the company drills to which I had become accustomed they moved about in pairs along

the shore and the lines of the fences. I learned that Antoine had ordered this, and the "troops" were obeying him with the utmost seriousness. The "service" on the estate was certainly abundant. It was only necessary to whistle and one of the Tyringham veterans would come running.

In spite of the complete satisfaction I had expressed to Torrence as to the perfect integrity and honest intentions of the two women, the curiosity of the American State Department and the visit of Montani required elucidation beyond my powers. At dinner they were in the merriest humor. The performances of the little army throughout the day had amused them greatly.

"How delightfully feudal!" exclaimed Alice. "Really we should have a moat and drawbridge to make the thing perfect. Constance and I are the best protected women in the world!"

We extracted all the fun possible from the idea that the estate was under siege; that Alice was the chatelaine of a beleaguered castle, and that before help could reach us we were in danger of being starved out by

the enemy. They called into play the poetry which had so roused Antoine's apprehensions, and their talk bristled with quotations. Alice rose after the salad and repeated at least a page of Malory, and the Knights of the Round Table having thus been introduced, Mrs. Farnsworth recited several sonorous passages from "The Idyls of the King." They flung lines from Browning's "In a Balcony" at each other as though they were improvising. The befuddlement of Antoine and the waiter who assisted him added to the general joy. They undoubtedly thought the two women quite out of their heads, and it was plain that I suffered greatly in Antoine's estimation by my encouragement of this frivolity. Mrs. Farnsworth walked majestically round the table and addressed to me the lines from Macbeth beginning:

> "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
> What thou art promised,"

while Antoine clung to the sideboard listening with mouth open and eyes rolling.

Later, in the living-room, Alice sang some old ballads. She was more adorable than

ever at the piano. It was a happiness beyond any in my experience of women to watch her, to note the play of light upon her golden head, to yield to the spell of her voice. Ballads had never been sung before with the charm and feeling she put into them; and after ending with "Douglas, Douglas," she responded to my importunity with "Ben Bolt," and then dashed into a sparkling thing of Chopin's, played it brilliantly and rose, laughingly mocking my applause.

I left the house like a man over whom an enchantment has been spoken and was not pleased when Antoine blocked my path: "Pardon me, sir."

"Bother my pardon; what's troubling you now?" I demanded.

"It's nothing troubling me, sir; not particularly. If you give me time, I think I'll grow used to the poetry talk and playing at being queens. It's like children in a family I served once; an English family, most respectable. But in a widow, sir——"

"God knows we ought to be glad when grown-ups have the heart to play at being children and can get away with it as beauti-

fully as those women do! What else is on your mind?"

"It's about Elsie, sir." I groaned at the mention of Flynn's German wife. "I'm sorry, sir; but I thought I should report it. It was a man who came to see her this afternoon. You was out for your walk, and Flynn had taken the ladies for a drive, so Elsie was alone at the garage. This person rode in on the grocer's truck from the village, which is how he got by the gate. As it happened, Pierre—he was a waiter at the Tyringham, a Swiss, who understands German—had gone into the garage for a nap; he's quite old, sir, and has his snooze every afternoon."

"He's entitled to it," I remarked; "he must be a thousand years old."

"From what he heard Pierre thought the man a spy, sir. He wanted Elsie to steal something from the house, it was a fan he wanted her to take most particular, and it was to be done soon, to-day if she could manage. It was for the love of the Fatherland that he wanted her to do it. Did you notice, sir, that Mrs. Bashford didn't have the fan to-night? Not that one she carried last night."

I had noticed that she had substituted a tiny Japanese fan for the one that Montani had inspected so eagerly. When I spoke of the change she had said the other was too precious for every-day use, and she meant to keep it locked up.

"I hate to bother you, sir, knowing you——"

The mention of the fan had brought me to an abrupt halt. I resented having the thing thrust at me in the ecstatic mood in which I had left the house, but the visit of the German-speaking stranger was serious, and Antoine knew that his story had startled me. He told me further that the man had carefully outlined to Elsie just how she could take advantage of her freedom of the house to appropriate the fan when the ladies were out and the servants off the second floor. She was to be paid for her assistance; two hundred dollars had been promised; even more had been suggested. Elsie and the stranger had left the garage and passed out of ear-shot before Elsie fully consented; but Pierre had given Antoine the impression that she would make the attempt.

"It was to be for the Kaiser, for Germany,"

declared Antoine bitterly. "And she was to be careful about Flynn. I always thought Flynn was straight—I did indeed, sir!"

"I think Flynn and his wife are both honest, but we'll take no chance. Warn the guards to be on the alert. We don't want Elsie to get the idea that she's being watched; so tell the men to keep away from the garage. I'll keep an eye on the Flynns. You go home and go to bed. . . ."

The deep calm of the country night had settled upon the shore, and the Flynns' quarters were perfectly tranquil. It didn't seem possible that an international episode was in process of incubation in that quiet neighborhood. I began to think that the general distrust of the German woman by her associates might be responsible for Pierre's story. But, viewed in any light, I had a duty to perform. If Elsie had visited the house and purloined the fan, she would be very likely to get rid of it as quickly as possible, and I determined to keep watch. I drew the blinds, got into my dressing-gown and, reinforcing the lamp-shade with a newspaper to deaden the light, proceeded to read.

It was on toward one o'clock and I was dozing when a sound roused me. A door on the Flynn side of the hall creaked; there was silence, then I heard furtive steps on the stair. I snapped out my light and peered out of the window just as Elsie's robust figure disappeared into the shadows. I was about to follow when the creaking of the Flynn door was repeated. In a moment another peep through the shade showed me Flynn himself, and he, too, quickly vanished. Here was a situation indeed! If Elsie was keeping tryst with her co-conspirator of the afternoon and her husband was spying upon her, a row of large proportions was likely to result at any moment. I leaned from the window as far as I dared, and saw the woman close to the wall at the farther end of the building. The scene was well set for trouble, and I was wondering what I could do to avert a disturbance and the exposure of the foolish woman when the whole matter was taken out of my hands.

"You fool! You scoundrel!" she bellowed in German. "That you should think me a plaything to commit a robbery for you! That

I should steal from my mistress to satisfy you, you piece of swine-flesh!"

I had often heard Elsie vocally disciplining her Irish husband and knew the power of her lungs and the vigor of her invective, but she seemed bent upon apprising the whole commonwealth of Connecticut of the fact that she was vastly displeased with the person she was addressing, who was certainly not Flynn. Amid sounds of a scuffle and the continuous outpouring of billingsgate the light over the garage door flashed on suddenly and disclosed Flynn in the act of precipitating himself into the fray. Elsie had grasped, and was stoutly clinging to a tall man who was trying to free himself of her muscular embrace. Her cries meanwhile included some of the raciest terms in the German dictionary and others—mouthfuls of frightfulness—that I didn't recognize.

When I reached the open Flynn was dancing round the belligerents like an excited boxer, occasionally springing in to land a blow; and all the while Elsie continued to address her captive and the world at large in her native tongue. Flynn was rather more

than sixty, and Elsie was not much his junior, while the invader was young and agile. The man had loosened one arm and drawn a revolver with which he was pounding Elsie in the face. I knocked the gun from his hand with my walking-stick and shouted to Elsie to let go of him. Her shouts had roused the guards and, hearing answering cries and the beat of hurrying feet on the walks, he redoubled his efforts to escape. I had hardly got my hands on him when with a twist of his body he wrenched himself free and sped away in the darkness.

I hadn't gone far in pursuit of him before I tripped over the skirts of my dressing-gown and fell into a bed of cannas. This would have been less melancholy if Flynn, hard behind, hadn't stumbled over me and, believing he had captured the enemy, gripped my legs until I could persuade him to let go.

The lights now flared on all the walks and driveways, and Antoine was bellowing orders to the guards to surround the sunken garden. I surmised that the fugitive, surprised by the attack, had lost his bearings and was now far from the boundary wall back of the garage

from which presumably he had entered the grounds. With the Sound cutting off his exit beyond the residence, there was a fair chance of catching him if Antoine's veterans were at all vigilant.

I found Antoine, armed with a club and swinging a lantern, majestically posed at the nearer entrance to the garden. With a swallow-tail coat over his night-shirt and his nightcap tipped over one ear, he was an enthralling figure. As he strode toward me his slippers flapped weirdly upon the brick walk. "There's somebody in the garden, sir," he whispered huskily. "The troops has it surrounded." No general in all history, reporting in some critical hour the disposition of his army, could have been more composed.

"You have done well, Antoine. Shall you dig in until morning or go over the top now?"

"As you say, sir. It's better you should take charge."

I walked round the garden and found his men well distributed, but the old fellows were exceedingly nervous. "It's a bit suspicious,

sir, that he broke for the garden," remarked Antoine.

"He broke for the garden," I suggested, "because his line of retreat was cut off and he had to go somewhere."

"It's queer, though, sir, when Dutch has been sleeping on the long bench down there by the fountain. You know how we feel about him, sir, he being of that race."

"Dutch told me he was camping in the tool-house," I answered.

"The boys drove him out, sir, and he took to the garden."

"Nasty of the boys, I should say. If that interloper should murder him——"

A yell rose from the midst of the garden, followed by a crash and an instant later by a splash that interrupted another yell. I snatched Antoine's lantern and ran down the steps toward the scene of commotion. When I reached the circular pool the jet was still playing gayly, but the waters on one side were in furious agitation. Two men were rolling and tumbling about as though bent upon drowning each other. I swung the lantern over them just as Dutch got upon

his feet, gripping his antagonist by the collar. He flung him backward over the stone curbing of the pool and fell upon him in the walk with a swish of wet garments. The guards from the outer edges of the garden had clambered down and they gathered about us as I began questioning Dutch.

Dutch, undoubtedly enjoying his victorious encounter, was tearing open the prostrate captive's collar to give him air and with his knees clamping the man's body was disposed to delay the story of his adventures to increase its dramatic effect.

"It happens this evenin'," he began, spouting water, "that I seen Elsie, who's been sneakin' me meals to the old stables, an' she says to me: 'Dutch,' she says, 'they's all ag'in us here, callin' us Huns, an' we gotta show 'em we's good Americans,' she says. An' she tole me a feller been to see 'er 'at wanted 'er to rob the house fer 'im, he thinkin' 'er likely to do ut fer love o' the Kaiser. She said as 'ow she'd nail 'im when he comes to-night to git a fan she's promised to lift fer 'im. She said that'd prove she wasn't no Dutchwoman and recommended if I got the

chance to do the same. I thought nothin' wuz goin' to happen an' wuz sleepin' on me bench here in the garden when the hollerin' at the garage woke me up. I sits quiet, listenin' an' this guy drops into the garden an' wuz crawlin' past me bench an' I pinches 'im. He wuz fer havin' a fight, an' we knocks over one of the big urns an' lit in the tank. He says it's a thousand bones an' ye turn me loose, he says, an' I soused 'im ag'in fer that."

The man was still choking from the sousings and Dutch turned him over and pounded him vigorously on the back, assisted by Zimmerman, the obliging valet, who had seized the occasion to show his hand on the side of the Allies. "Shall I telephone for the Barton police, sir?" asked Antoine with an extreme exaggeration of his professional manner.

This obviously was the thing to do, but I feigned not to hear the question while I debated the matter. It was plain that many things relating to the capture were veiled in mystery: that if Mrs. Bashford and her companion were involved in an international tangle and had in their possession something that vitally concerned the nations at war,

common chivalry demanded that I handle the arrest of Montani's agent in such manner as to shield them. I was thinking hard and in my perplexity even considered sending a messenger for Torrence; but he was already suspicious and would be very likely to summon Raynor immediately and precipitate a crisis I was not prepared to face. To invite the attention of the American State Department to the increasingly complex situation would not be giving my aunt the chance I meant she should have to clear herself.

The captive had got upon his feet and stood dazedly staring at us. He refused to answer my questions, even when I suggested that if he could give a satisfactory account of himself he would be released. He only doggedly shook his head. When I asked if he had been hurt in his bout with Dutch he smiled and extended his arms in denial. He was a very decent-looking fellow, blue-eyed and smooth-shaven, who seemed to accept his plight with a degree of good humor.

I decided that as nothing would be gained by sending him to the Barton calaboose that night, I would assume the responsibility of

detaining him until I had groped my way through the haze of suspicions and circumstances that enveloped him.

"Get some dry clothes for this man and lock him up in the tool-house. Be sure he has blankets, and you'd better give him some hot coffee."

The captive manifested relief at my decision and broke his silence to thank me, which he did in very good English. His submissiveness only deepened my perplexity, but I couldn't help laughing as he walked away surrounded by the "troops," with Dutch leading the way—Dutch fully conscious that he had vindicated himself and disposed to be rather disdainful of his comrades.

I hurried to the house, where I found Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth ministering to Elsie, who had been taken there by their order. Elsie, sharing with Dutch the honors of the night, lay on a davenport, where she had received first aid. Alice rose from her knees as I entered, gathering up strips of bandages, and turned to me laughingly.

"Elsie's injuries are not serious; only disagreeable bruises in the face. There will be

no scars, I'm sure. We'll keep her at the house for a few days until she's quite fit again. Surely any one who has questioned Elsie's loyalty ought to be satisfied now."

"You certainly managed it very cleverly, Elsie. We're all very grateful."

Elsie, her face covered with bandages, acknowledged my thanks by wiggling her foot.

Mrs. Farnsworth said she would put Elsie to bed. Now, I thought, Alice would make some sign if she knew anything that would explain Montani and the prisoner in the tool-house. But the whole affair only moved her to laughter and she seemed less a grown woman than ever in her white robe. My efforts to impress her with the seriousness of the attempt to secure the fan only added to her delight.

"How droll! How very droll! You couldn't possibly have arranged anything that would please me more! It's delicious! As you say in America, it's perfectly killing!"

I suggested that the holding of a prisoner without process of law might present embarrassments.

"I know," she cried, clapping her hands joyfully. "You mean we are likely to bump into dear old *habeas corpus!* The sheriff will come and read a solemn paper to you and you will have to hie you to court and produce the body of the prisoner. That will be splendid!"

"It won't be so funny if——"

I was about to say that the humor of the thing would be spoiled somewhat if she were made a witness and there proved to be something irregular about the fan which had caused all the trouble, but I hadn't the heart to do it. To spoil such merriment as bubbled in her heart would be cruel—an atrocity as base as snatching a plaything from a joyous child.

"Constance and I so love the unusual—and it is so hard to find!" she continued. "And yet from the moment I reached the gates of these premises things have happened! Nothing is omitted! Strange visitors; fierce attacks upon our guards, and still the mystery deepens in the wee sma' hours, with heroes and heroines at every turn! To think that that absurd little Dutch was asleep in

the garden and really captured the spy or whatever he is! But you are a hero too! You shall be decorated!"

She walked to a stand and pondered a moment before a vase of roses, chose a long-stemmed red one and struck me lightly across the shoulder with it.

"Arise, sir knight! You should have knelt, but to kneel in skirts requires practice; you could hardly have managed in that monk's robe."

I couldn't be sure whether she was mocking me or whether there was really liking under this nonsense. I was beyond the point of being impatient with her. I was helpless in her hands; she would do with me as she willed, and it was my business to laugh with her, to meet her as best I could in the realm of folly.

"You must go!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Constance will be calling down the stairs for me in a moment."

"To-morrow—" I began. The wistful look she had at times came into her eyes as she stood in the centre of the room, playing with the flower.

"To-morrow," she repeated, "and then—to-morrow!"

"There must be endless to-morrows for you and me," I said, and took the flower from her hand. The revery died in her eyes, and they were awake with reproach and dismissal. At the door I looked back. She hadn't moved and she said, very quietly, but smiling a little: "Nothing must happen to make me sorry I came. Please remember!"

CHAPTER IV

PURSUING KNIGHTS

I DIDN'T sleep until near daybreak, and was aroused at nine o'clock by Flynn, who appeared at the door in his chauffeur's togs, carrying a tray.

"The wife didn't come back, sorr, but I made coffee and toast. Sorry to waken you, but I'm takin' the new car into the city."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

"Who's going to the city?" I demanded.

"The ladies is goin' at once, sorr. They sent orders an hour ago to be ready with the new machine. Orders was to take my bag; it looks like I'd be gone the night. I'm late and you'll have to excuse me, sorr."

I sprang out of bed and plied him with questions, most of which he was unable to answer. I did, however, extract from him the information that nothing had occurred after I retired for the night that could have

alarmed the women at the residence and prompted this abrupt departure. There was no reason why Alice shouldn't run to town if it pleased her to do so, and yet it was odd that she hadn't mentioned the matter. Flynn hurried away, and from the window I followed the car's course to the house, and a moment later caught a glimpse of it on its way to the gates.

I was shaving when Antoine appeared, pale from the stirring incidents of the night.

"I suppose you know, sir," he said, straightening the coffee-pot on the tray in an attempt to conceal his emotions.

"When did you first hear that the ladies meant to leave to-day?" I shouted with a flourish of the razor. "If you knew it last night and didn't tell me——"

"I heard it, incidental-like, at breakfast this morning. There was a night letter, sir, read by the agent at Barton to the mistress quite early, sir. I can't tell you what it was, sir."

"Did they seem alarmed or depressed; was there anything to indicate whether they had bad news?"

"They seemed quite merry over it, sir. But you know their goings-on, which I never understand, sir. For all I know it may be a death in the family; you'd never tell it from their actions. You will pardon me for remarking it again, sir; but, considering that they're ladies, their actions and goings-on is most peculiar."

"As to luggage, I hope you had the intelligence to note whether they went for a long stay?"

"Only the suitcases that fits into the rack of the machine. Louise thought they might be going for a week, maybe."

This was all I got out of him. Mrs. Bashford and Mrs. Farnsworth had flown, giving no hint of the length of their absence. They had slipped away and left me with a prisoner that I didn't know what to do with; with an inquiry by the American Department of State hanging over me; with Torrence to reckon with, and, in general, a muddled head that only a vast number of lucid explanations could restore to sanity.

I called from the window to one of the gardeners who knew how to manage a ma-

chine and told him to be ready to drive me to the village in half an hour. There was an express at ten-forty, and by taking it I would at least have the satisfaction of being somewhere in New York when the runaways arrived. Antoine packed my suitcase; I am not sure that he didn't shed tears on my belongings. The old fellow was awed into silence by the rapidity with which history had been made in the past twenty-four hours, and clearly was not pleased by my desertion.

We drove past the tool-house, where I found the prisoner seated on a wheelbarrow smoking a cigarette. He was no more communicative than when I had questioned him after his capture. He smiled in a bored fashion when I asked if he wanted anything, and said he would be obliged for cigarettes and reading-matter. He volunteered nothing as to his identity, and the guards said that a thorough search of the captive's clothing had disclosed nothing incriminating. He had three hundred dollars in currency (this was to cover Elsie's bribe money, I conjectured), a handkerchief, a cigarette-case, and a box of matches. I directed that he be well

fed and given all the reading-matter he wanted, and hurried on to catch my train.

The futility of my errand struck me hard as I felt the city surging round me. Without a clew to work on, I was utterly unlikely to find the two women, and even if I should stumble upon them, in what way could I explain my conduct in following them? I was visited also by the discouraging thought that New York might not, after all, be their destination.

Flynn was a capable but cautious driver, and they would hardly reach town before five o'clock. I took a room at the Thackeray Club and pondered carefully whether, in spite of my misgivings, I hadn't better see Torrence and tell him all that had happened since his call on Mrs. Bashford. If there was any chance of doing the wrong thing in any matter not prescribed in the laws governing the administration of estates, he would be sure to do it; but I was far from satisfied with the results of my own management of affairs at Barton. I finally called up the trust company and learned that Torrence was in Albany attending the trial of a will case and might not be in town for a couple

of days. His secretary said he had instructions to wire my daily report to Albany. I told him there had been no developments at Barton, and went out and walked the Avenue. Inquiries at hotels large and small occupied me until seven o'clock. No one had heard of a Mrs. Bashford or a Mrs. Farnsworth. My inspection of the occupants of several thousand automobiles proved equally fruitless. I ate a lonely dinner at the club and resumed my search. Hanging about theatre doors, staring at the crowd, is not a dignified occupation, and by nine o'clock, having seen the most belated theatre-goers vanish, I was tired and footsore. The flaming sign of Searles's "Who Killed Cock Robin?" over the door of the "As You Like It" caught my eye. I bought a seat—the last in the rack—and squeezed into my place in the middle of the last row. As I had seen the piece at least a dozen times, its novelty was gone for me, but the laughter of the delighted audience was cheering. The first act was reaching its culmination, and I watched it with a glow of pride in Searles and his skilful craftsmanship.

As the curtain fell and the lights went up

amid murmurs of pleasure and expectancy, I glanced across the rows of heads with awakened interest. "Who Killed Cock Robin?" had been praised with such unanimity that if Alice were in any playhouse that night I was as likely to see her in the "As You Like It" as anywhere.

The half-turned face of a man three rows in front of me suddenly caught my attention. There was something curiously familiar in his outlines and the gesture with which, at the moment, he was drawing his handkerchief across his forehead. I judged that he too had come late, for he now removed his topcoat and thrust his hat under the seat. It was Montani—beyond any question Montani—and I instinctively shrank in my seat and lifted my programme as he turned round and swiftly surveyed the rows behind him.

I watched his black head intently until I remembered the superstition that by staring at a person in a public place you can make him look at you. Montani knew a great many things I wanted to know, but I must have time to adjust myself to the shock of his propinquity. I satisfied myself that he

was alone and as he continued to mop his face I judged that he had arrived in some haste. The house now took note of a stirring in one of the boxes. There was an excited buzz as the tall form and unmistakable features of Cecil Arrowsmith, the English actor, were recognized. I had read that day of his arrival in New York. With him were two women. My breath came hard and I clutched the iron frame of the seat in front of me so violently that its occupant turned and glared.

The trio settled into their places quickly, but not before I had satisfied myself that Arrowsmith's companions were Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth. As they fell into animated talk I saw that Alice was in her gayest humor. The distinguished tragedian seemed greatly amused by what she was saying to him.

"Must be members of Arrowsmith's company," one of my neighbors remarked. "They open in two weeks in Shakespearian repertoire."

Montani had half risen, the better to focus an opera-glass on the box. The gong solemnly announced the second act, and Alice moved her chair to face the stage. Once more Mon-

tani scanned the party with his glass. As the lights faded Alice, with the pretty languorous gesture I so well remembered, opened her fan—the fan of ostrich plumes, that became a blur of white that held my eye through the dusk after the curtain rose.

Alice, Montani, and the fan! To this combination I had now to add the new element introduced into the situation by the apparent familiar acquaintance of Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth with Cecil Arrowsmith. And yet, as the play proceeded on its swift-moving course, I reasoned that there was nothing extraordinary in their knowing the eminent actor. He had long been a personage in England and had lately been knighted. Their appearance with him at the theatre really disposed of the idea that they might be impostors. The presence of Arrowsmith had put zest into the company, and I hadn't seen a better performance of Searles's play. The trio in the box joined in the prolonged applause at the end of the act.

As they resumed their talk Alice, it seemed, was relating something of moment for Arrowsmith's benefit, referring now and then to

Mrs. Farnsworth as though for corroboration. The scene in the box was almost as interesting as any in the play, and the audience watched with deep absorption. Alice, the least self-conscious of mortals, was, I knew, utterly unaware of the curious gaze of the house; whatever she was saying with an occasional gesture of her gloved hands or a shrug of her shoulders possessed her completely. I thought she might be telling Arrowsmith of her adventures at Barton; but the length of her narrative was against this, and Arrowsmith's attitude was more that of a critic appealed to for an opinion than of a polite listener to a story. He nodded his head several times, and finally, as Alice, with a slight dip of the head and an outward movement of her arms, settled back in her chair, he patted his hands approvingly.

In my absorption I had forgotten Montani's existence, but as the third act began I saw that he had gone. Whether I should put myself in Alice's way as she left the theatre was still an undetermined question when the play ended. With Montani hanging about I felt a certain obligation to warn her that he

had been watching her. I was among the first to leave, and in the foyer I met Forsythe, the house manager, who knew me as a friend of Searles.

"You notice that we're still turning 'em away," he remarked. "We don't have to worry about this piece; everybody who sees it sends his friends the next day. Searles hasn't looked in for some time; hope he's writing a new play?"

"He's West visiting his folks. Don't know when he'll be back," I answered. "I must write him that Sir Cecil Arrowsmith enjoyed 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' just as much as common mortals."

Forsythe had paused at the box-office, and in my uncertainty I stuck to him as the crowd began to surge by.

Arrowsmith's approach was advertised by the peculiar type of tall hat that he affected, and the departing audience made way for him, or hung back to stare. At his left were Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth, and they must pass quite close to me. "Who Killed Cock Robin?" was a satisfying play that sent audiences away with lightened hearts and

smiling faces, and the trio were no exception to the rule.

Listening inattentively to Forsythe, I was planning to join Alice when the trio should reach me. She saw me; there was a fleeting flash of recognition in her eyes, and then she turned toward Arrowsmith. She drew nearer; her gaze met mine squarely, but now without a sign to indicate that she had ever seen me before. She passed on, talking with greatest animation to Arrowsmith.

"Well, remember me to Searles if you write him," I heard Forsythe saying. I clutched his arm as he opened the office door.

"Who are those women?" I demanded.

"You may search me! I see you have a good eye. That girl's rather nice to look at!"

Crowding my way to the open, I blocked the path of orderly, sane citizens awaiting their machines until a policeman pushed me aside. Alice I saw for a bewildering instant, framed in the window of a big limousine that rolled away up-town.

I had been snubbed! No snub had ever been delivered more deliberately, with a nicer calculation of effect, than that administered

to me by Alice Bashford—a girl with whom, until a moment before, I had believed myself on terms of cordial comradeship. She had cut me; Alice who had asked me at the very beginning of our acquaintance to call her by her first name—Alice had cut me without the quiver of a lash.

I walked to the Thackeray and settled myself in a dark corner of the reading-room, thoroughly bruised in spirit. In my resentment I meditated flying to Ohio to join Searles, always my chief resource in trouble. Affairs at Barton might go to the devil. If Alice and her companion wanted to get rid of me, I would not be sorry to be relieved of the responsibility I had assumed in trying to protect them. With rising fury I reflected that by the time they had shaken off Montani and got rid of the prisoner in the toolhouse they would think better of me.

"Telephone call, sir."

I followed the boy to the booth in a rage that any one should disturb my gloomy reflections.

"Mr. Singleton? Oh! This is Alice speaking——"

I clutched the shelf for support. Not only was it Alice speaking, but in the kindest voice imaginable. My anger passed, but my amazement at Alice and all her ways blinded me. If she had suddenly stepped through the wall, my surprise could not have been greater.

"You told me the Thackeray was your usual refuge in town, so I thought I'd try it. Are you very, very cross? I'm sorry, really I am—Bob!"

The "Bob" was added lingeringly, propitiatingly. Huddled in the booth, I doubted my senses—wondering indeed whether Alice hadn't a double—even whether I hadn't dreamed everything that had occurred at Barton.

"I *wanted* to speak to you ever so much at the theatre, but I couldn't very well without introducing you to Sir Cecil, and I wasn't ready to do that. It might have caused complications."

If anything could have multiplied the existing complications, I was anxious to know what they were; but her voice was so gentle, so wholly amiable, that I restrained an impulse to demand explanations.

"Are you on earth or are you speaking from paradise?" I asked.

"Oh, we're in a very nice house, Constance and I; and we're just about having a little supper. I wish you were here, but that can't be arranged. No; really it can't! We shall be motoring back to Barton to-morrow and hope you can join us. Let us have luncheon and motor up together."

When I suggested that I call for them she laughed gayly.

"That would be telling things! And we mustn't spoil everything when everything is going so beautifully."

Remembering the man I had locked up in the tool-house and the explanations I should have to make sooner or later to the unimaginative Torrence, I wasn't wholly convinced of the general beauty of the prospect.

"Montani was in the theatre," I suggested.

Her laughter rippled merrily over the wire. "Oh, he tried to follow us in a taxi! We had a great time throwing him off in the park. I'm not sure he isn't sitting on the curb right now watching the house ungraciously."

"You have the fan with you; Montani

jumped right out of his seat when you opened it in the theatre."

This she received with more laughter; Montani amused her immensely, she said. She wasn't in the least afraid of him. Returning to the matter of the luncheon, she suggested the Tyringham.

"You know, I want very much to see Mr. Bashford's old home and the place all our veteran retainers came from. At one?—yes. Good night!" . . .

Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth reached the Tyringham on time to the minute. As I had spent the morning on a bench in the park, analyzing my problems, I found their good humor a trifle jarring.

"You don't seem a bit glad to see us," Alice complained as she drew off her gloves. "How can any one be anything but happy after seeing that delicious 'Cock Robin'! It is so deliciously droll."

"I haven't," I remarked with an attempt at severity, "quite your knack of ignoring disagreeable facts. There was Montani right in front of me, jumping like a jack-in-the-box every time you flourished your fan.

There's that fellow we've got locked up at Barton——"

"Just hear the man, Constance!" she interrupted with her adorable laugh. "We were thinking that he was beginning to see things our way, the only true way, the jolly way, and here he cometh like a melancholy Jaques! We'll have none of it!"

"We must confess," said Mrs. Farnsworth conciliatingly, "that Mr. Singleton is passing through a severe trial. We precipitated ourselves upon him without warning, and immediately involved him in a mesh of mystery. His imagination must have time to adjust itself."

"Ah, the imagination!" sighed Alice with her wistful smile. "How little patience the world has with anything but the soberest facts! Why should we bother about that lunatic Montani or the gentleman immured in the tool-house? I couldn't introduce you to Sir Cecil without anticipating the end of our story; and I want you to keep wondering and wondering about us. It's all so jolly! I love it all! And really you wouldn't spoil it, Bob! It's dreadful to spoil things."

They were spoiling my appetite; I was perfectly aware of that. I had ordered the best luncheon I knew how to compose, and they were doing full justice to it; but I was acting, I knew, like a resentful boy.

"I love you that way," said Alice as I stared vacantly at my plate. "But you really are not making yourself disagreeable to us—really he is not, Constance!"

Mrs. Farnsworth affirmed this. I knew that I was merely being rude, and the consciousness of this was not uplifting. At the luncheon hour the influx of shoppers gives the Tyringham a cheery tone, and all about us were people apparently conversing sanely and happily. The appearance of Uncle Bash's ghost in the familiar dining-room would have been a welcome diversion. I was speculating as to just what he would say about his widow and the whole mess at Barton when Mrs. Farnsworth addressed me pleadingly.

"If you knew that we want you to play with us only a few days longer—three days, shall we say, Alice?—if you knew that then we'll untangle everything, wouldn't you be nice—very nice?"

In spite of myself I couldn't resist this appeal. I was more and more impressed by the fineness, the charm of Mrs. Farnsworth. When she dropped the make-believe foolishness in which she indulged quite as amusingly as Alice, she appeared to be a very sensible person. The humor danced in her eyes now, but her glance was more than an appeal; it was a command.

"If you knew that our troubles are not at all the troubles you're thinking about, but very different——"

"Please pardon me!" I muttered humbly, and wished that Alice were not so bewitching in a sailor hat. It may have been the hat or only Mrs. Farnsworth's pleading tone that brought me to a friendlier attitude toward the universe and its visible inhabitants. The crowd thinned out, but we lingered, talking of all manner of things.

"We must come in again very soon," said Alice. "And next time we shan't run away, which was very naughty. I suppose when you begin a story you just have to keep it going or it will die on your hands. That's the way with our story, you know. Of course

it's unkind to mystify you; but you are in the story just as we are."

My mystification was certainly deep enough without this suggestion that I was a mere character in a tale whose awkward beginning aroused only the gravest apprehensions as to the conclusion. She looked at her watch and continued:

"I'm so absurd—really I am, in ever so many ways, that no one would ever put me in a book. Every one would say no such person ever existed! It's incredible! And so I have to pretend I'm in a story all the time. It's the only way I can keep happy. And so many people are in my story now, not only Montani and the poor fellow locked up at Barton—oh, what if he should escape! Constance, it would be splendid if he should escape!"

"I don't think it would be splendid if he escaped!" I exclaimed, sitting up very straight at the bare thought of such a calamity. "He would either kill me or sue me for damages."

"Oh, that wouldn't fit into the story at all! Murder and damages are so frightfully

sordid and generally disagreeable. We must have nothing like that in our story."

"You didn't finish your enumeration of characters," I suggested. "Is my part an important one or am I only a lay figure?"

"My dear boy," cried Mrs. Farnsworth, "you are the hero! You have been the hero from the hour the story began. If you should desert us now, whatever should we do!"

"If I'm the hero," I replied in her own key, "I shall begin making love to Alice at once."

Alice, far from being disturbed by my declaration, nodded her head approvingly.

"Oh, we had expected that! But you needn't be in a hurry. In a story like this one, that runs right on from day to day, we must leave a lot to chance. And there are ever so many chances——"

"Not all on the side of failure, I hope?"

"We *must* be going." She laughed. I wished she hadn't that characteristic little turn of the head that was so beguiling!

Folly rode with us all the way to Barton. If anything sensible was uttered on the drive, I can't recall it. Our talk, chiefly of knights

and ladies, and wild flights from imaginary enemies, had the effect of spurring Flynn to perilous spurts of speed.

"Flynn has caught the spirit!" cried Alice exultingly. "Haven't you, Flynn?"

Flynn, turning to confirm this, caused the car to swerve and graze a truck piled high with household goods.

"We may elude the pursuing knights," I suggested, "but some village constable may take it into his head to pinch us."

"Oh, that would be lovely," cried Alice. "And we'd telegraph dear Mr. Torrence to come and bail us out."

We reached Barton at nine o'clock and after an informal supper I listened to Antoine's solemn reports as I walked to the garage. The prisoner had made no sign, he said, and nothing had occurred during the day.

"But there's this, Mr. Singleton, which you ought to know, sir. The old Tyringham people don't like the goings on here. You'll admit it's all mighty queer. I don't complain, sir, but some of the boys threatens to leave, sir. And I look at it this way, that

nobody understanding what the spying and bribes offered and taking prisoners is all about, is most peculiar. We got to know where we stand, that's what it's come to, sir. And the widow being flighty-like and Flynn coming home and saying nothing, but shaking his head when we ask him where he's been— You see for yourself, sir, how it looks to us."

What he said as to the general aspect of things was true, but I didn't admit that it was true. Alice had converted me to the notion that I was a character in a story, a plaything of fate, and I lightly brushed aside Antoine's melancholy plaint.

"Any man of you," I said, "who leaves this property will be brought back and shot. Tell that to the boys!"

Nevertheless, the perfect equanimity of the gentleman in the tool-house when I visited him the next morning shook my faith a trifle in the story-book features of life at Barton. He was an exemplary prisoner, the guards reported, and he had maintained the strictest silence in my absence. He ate, smoked, and read, courteously thanking the men for their

attentions, and that was all. When I showed myself at the window he rose and threw down the magazine he was reading and replied good-naturedly to my inquiry as to how he was getting along.

"I have no complaint except that the guards snore outrageously. The poor old chaps will sleep, you know."

"If you're so badly guarded, why don't you escape?" I asked tartly.

"It would relieve your mind a lot if I should disappear?" he asked insinuatingly.

"You are impertinent," I replied, irritated that he should have surmised that his presence was causing me uneasiness. "If you will come to your senses and tell me the meaning of your visits here, we may agree upon terms. As it stands, you're a trespasser; you tried to bribe a servant to rob the house. If you're at all familiar with criminal law in this country, you can estimate the number of years' imprisonment that will be handed you for these little indiscretions."

"If it's all so plain, why don't you hand me over to the authorities?" he asked, provokingly cool.

"I'm giving you a chance to confess and tell who's back of all this. Tell me just why your confederate Montani is annoying Mrs. Bashford, and I'll turn you loose."

"Perhaps, my dear sir, the motive that impels you to detain me unlawfully is the same that enjoins silence upon me! Please consider that a little."

I replied that I would consider nothing short of a confession. In a match of wits he was fully my equal, and in the mastery of his temper he certainly had the best of me.

"If you wait for me to confess anything, you will wait forever," he replied. "I repeat that we are impelled by the same motives, you and I. I think I needn't enlighten you as to what they are."

"I shall be glad to hear your idea of my motives," I answered feebly.

"I shall be frank," he replied readily. "The reason you don't turn me over to the police is the very simple one that you don't want to embarrass the mistress of the house yonder by causing the light of publicity to beat upon her very charming head. You

wish to save her annoyance, and possibly something much graver. I can see that you are impressed; but it ought to please you to know that I share your feeling of delicacy where she is concerned. And let me add that the Count Montani is animated by like feeling. So there we are, exactly on the same ground!"

"You haven't answered my questions!" I blustered to hide my annoyance at being thrust further into the dark. "You don't understand Mrs. Bashford," I went on hurriedly. "It is inconceivable that any one should wish to injure her or that she could have committed any act that would cause her to be spied upon. She's tremendously imaginative; she indulges in little fancies that are a part of her charm!"

"Little fancies!" he repeated, hiding a yawn. "It's deplorable for a pretty woman to have an imagination; there's danger there!"

"Your philosophy bores me," I said, and left him. He had lied about the snoring of the guards—Antoine satisfied me of that—but I gave instructions to double the watch.

CHAPTER V

ALICE

I WANTED to be alone and struck off for a wood that lay on the northern end of the estate. This was the most picturesque spot on the property, a wild confusion of trees and boulders. On a summit in the midst of it Uncle Bash had built a platform round a majestic pine from which to view the Sound. I mounted the ladder and was brushing the dead leaves from the bench when, somewhere below me and farther on, I heard voices.

I flattened myself on the platform, listening intently. A stiff breeze from the Sound flung the voices clearly to my hiding-place, and I became aware that Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth were holding a colloquy in what seemed to be the vein of their whimsical make-believe. That they should be doing this in the depth of the woodland merely for their own amusement did not surprise me—

nothing they could have done would have astonished me—but the tone of their talk changed abruptly.

"Try it from that boulder there, Alice," said Mrs. Farnsworth. "It's an ideal place, created for the very purpose."

I could see them moving about and hear the swish of shrubbery and the scraping of their feet on the rough slope.

"How will that do?" asked Alice.

"Beautifully," replied Mrs. Farnsworth. "Now go ahead from the beginning of the scene."

Cautiously drawing back the branches, I espied Alice striking a pose on a mammoth rock. She bent forward, clasping her knees, and with an occasional glance at what appeared to be an open book beside her, she began:

"You ask me who I am, my lord? It matters not at all who or what I am; let it suffice that berries are my food and the brook that sings behind me gives me drink. To be one thing or another is a weariness. Would you ask yonder oak for a name, or trouble the wind with like foolish questions? No;

it is enough that a tree is strong and fine to look upon and that a wind has healing in its wings."

With her head to one side and an arresting gesture, and throwing into her voice all its charm and a new compelling innocence and sweetness, she continued:

"But you would have a name? Then, O foolish one, so much I will tell you: Yesterday I was Helen, who launched a thousand ships and shook the topless towers of Ilium. To-day I am Rosalind in the forest of Arden, and to-morrow I may be Antigone, or Ariel or Viola, or what you will. I am what I make myself or choose to be. I pray you, let that suffice."

My face was wet with perspiration, and my heart thumped wildly. For either I was stark, staring mad, or these were lines from Searles's "Lady Larkspur," the manuscript of which was carefully locked in my trunk.

"That should be spoken a trifle more slowly, and with the best air of unpremeditatedness you can put into it," Mrs. Farnsworth was saying. "You can work it out better when you've memorized the lines. It's

immensely effective having the last scene come back to the big boulder on the mountainside. Let me look at that a minute."

She took up the manuscript—there was no question of the blue cover of my copy of "Lady Larkspur"—and turned to the passage she sought.

"Let me read this over," Mrs. Farnsworth continued: "'I have played, my lord, at hide-and-seek with the stars, and I have run races with the brooks. You alone of all that have sought me are equally fleet of foot and heart! If you but touch my hand, I am lost forever. And this hand—I beg you look at it—is as brown as a berry and as rough as hickory bark. A wild little hand and not lightly to be yielded at any man's behest. Look at me carefully, my lord.' She rises to full height quickly. Let me see you do that, Alice."

Alice's golden head became more distinctively visible as she stood erect upon the boulder.

"Oh, no! You can improve on that; it must be done lightly and quickly, just touching the tips of your fingers to the rock. Ah,

splendid! Now stand with one hand dropped upon the hip—let me see how that looks. Very good; now repeat these lines after me. 'This other world, of which you speak?' Shake your head slowly, frowning; every hint of sincere doubt and questioning you can throw into look and gesture. 'Is it a kind world, a place of honest hearts? You have spoken of cities, and crowded avenues, of music and theatres and many things I have read of but never seen. You promise me much, but what should I do in so vast a company? I am very happy here. Spring and summer fill my hands with flowers and in winter I lay my face to the wind that carries sleet and snow. All this is mine.' Arms stretched out. You mustn't make that stiff —very good. 'Earth and sky and forest belong to me. The morning comes down the sky in search of me and the tired day bids me good-night at the western gate. You would change rags for silk.' You turn your body and catch your skirt in your hands, looking down. Yes; you are barefoot in this scene. You'll have to practise that turn. Now— 'And yet I should lose my dominion; in that

world you boast of I should no more be Lady Larkspur.' "

Alice had repeated these lines, testing and trying different modulations. Sometimes a dozen repetitions hardly sufficed to satisfy Mrs. Farnsworth, who herself recited them and postured for Alice's instruction.

"Please read the whole of the second act again," said Alice, seating herself on the boulder. I waited for a few minutes, enjoying the beautiful flow of Mrs. Farnsworth's voice, then, mystified and awed, I crept down the ladder and stole away. "It's Dick Searles's play," I kept whispering to myself. It was the "Lady Larkspur" that he was holding back until he could find the girl who had so enchanted him in London and for whom he had written this very comedy with its setting in the Virginia hills.

Hurrying to the garage, I snarled at Flynn, who said Torrence had been calling me all morning and had finally left word that he would motor to Barton at eight the next evening to see me on urgent business. I unlocked my trunk and dug out my copy of "Lady Larkspur." Not even the wizardry

of Alice and her friend could have extracted the script. The two women had in some way possessed themselves of another copy, an exact duplicate, even to its blue paper cover; and I sat down and began recalling everything Searles had told me about his efforts to find the actress.

The telephone on the table at my elbow rang until Flynn came in timidly to quiet it.

"If it's Mr. Torrence—" I began.

"It's the Barton station, sir. There's a telegram." I snatched the receiver spitefully, thinking it only the methodical Torrence confirming the appointment made by telephone. But the operator began reading:

"SPRINGFIELD, OHIO, September 30, 1917.

"Cable from London agent says last forwarding address for Violet Dewing was hotel in Seattle. Please ask Harkaway & Stein and anybody else on Broadway who might know what companies are on coast or headed that way. I find no clew in theatrical papers and don't want to mess things by making inquiries direct. If party can be located, will start West immediately.

"SEARLES."

The thought of Searles was comforting, and I reproached myself for not having summoned him at the beginning of my perplexities. I immediately dictated this reply:

"Take first train East and come to me at Barton as quickly as possible. Hope to have news for you."

I then jotted down on a scratch pad this memorandum:

"The young woman representing herself as Mrs. Bashford and now established in my uncle's house is one or all of the following persons:

"1. Uncle Bash's widow.

"2. An impostor.

"3. A spy of some sort, pursued by secret agents.

"4. Violet Dewing, an actress.

"5. The most interesting and the loveliest and most charming girl in the world."

I checked off one, two, and three as doubtful if not incredible; four seemed possible, and five was wholly incontrovertible. But the first three certainly required much illumination, and the fourth I was helpless to reconcile with any of the others but the last. I reviewed Searles's enthusiastic description

of the young woman who had inspired him to write "Lady Larkspur," and could only excuse my stupidity in not fitting it to Alice the first time I saw her on the ground that Barton was the last place in the world I should have looked for her. And then, with all his exuberance, Searles hadn't done her justice!

The following day nothing of importance happened, though Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth again spent the morning in the woodland, presumably studying Searles's play. My thoughts galloped through my head in a definite formula: "If she is not my aunt—" "If she is an impostor—" "If she is a spy playing a deep game in the seclusion of Barton—" "If she is the actress Searles is seeking—" At any rate, I would respect her wish to play the game through; the dangers of carrying the story-book idea to one of half a dozen possible conclusions were not inconsiderable, but I was resolved that she should finish the tale in her own fashion.

On my way to luncheon I passed Dutch pushing a wheelbarrow containing a huge hamper.

"It's vittles for the prisoner, sir," he re-

marked. "He's some feeder, that guy, and I guess the sooner we shake 'im th' better. He kicks on th' wine, sir. Says it's questionable vintage. When he gets tired readin' he pokes his head through the window and kids th' boys. He says he's goin' to remember th' place and come back when he's old. A charmin' retreat fer supernumerary superannuates, he calls it. Them's his woids. I'm gittin' sort o' nervous havin' 'im round. Zimmerman—he's the clothes-presser—tried to talk Goiman to 'im this mornin' an' th' guy pretended like his feelin's wuz hoit, an' he never knowed th' Hun's language, he says. An' Elsie says she's prepared to swear he talked Goiman easy enough to her."

"We'll consider his case later, Dutch. The matter is delicate, most delicate."

If I had expected Searles and his play to be introduced into the table-talk, I was doomed to disappointment. A dozen times I smothered an impulse to tell Alice and Mrs. Farnsworth I had watched them in the woodland and of Searles's long search for the ideal of his "Lady Larkspur," but I was afraid to risk their displeasure. They enjoyed walking

in the wood, they said, and when I charged them with selfishness in not taking me along, Alice immediately suggested a tramp later in the afternoon.

"I'll send you away after luncheon—I have loads of letters to write, but by four o'clock I'll be keen for the woods again."

"Letters to all my good fairies," she laughed when I went for her; "and you mustn't look at the addresses!" She suggested that we walk to the village as she liked to post her letters herself. We went through the woods where I had seen her the day before.

"Constance and I were here this morning," she said when we reached the big boulder. "Let me see; I think I'll try a little trick to test the hand of fate. Give me those letters, please. If this falls with the address up, I'll mail it," and she chose one and handed me the others; "if the flap side turns up, I'll destroy it."

She sent it spinning into the air. A branch caught and held it an instant, then it fell, turning over and over, and lay straight on edge against a weed.

"No decision!" I cried. "It's an exact perpendicular."

She knelt beside it, pondering. "I think it leans just a trifle to the address side," she announced. "Therefore you may return it to your pocket and it goes into the post-office."

"These letters would probably answer a lot of questions for me if I dared run away with them," I suggested.

"The thought does you no credit, sir. You promised not to meddle, but just to let things take their course, and I must say that you are constantly improving. At times you grow suspicious—yes, you know you do—but, take it all in all, you do very well."

At the post-office she dropped all the letters but one into the chute. "It really *did* fall a little to the address side?" she questioned.

I gave my judgment that the letter stood straight on edge, inclining neither way.

"If my life hung in the balance, I should certainly not act where fate had been so timid."

"Perhaps this *does* affect you," she said, quite soberly. And there in the lobby of

the little Barton post-office, for the first time, I indulged the hope that there was something more than friendliness and kindness in her eyes. Her usual composure was gone—for a moment only—and she fingered the envelope nervously in her slim, expressive hands. A young woman clerk thrust her head through the delivery window and manifested a profound interest in our colloquy.

"Suppose," said Alice musingly, "I were to tell you that if I mail this letter the effect will be to detain me in America for some time; if I don't send it, I shall have to write another that will mean that I shall go very soon. If I stay on at Barton instead of going home to take up my little part again for England in the war, it will be an act of selfishness—just some more of my foolishness, more of the make-believe life that Constance and I have been living here."

"I want you to stay," I said earnestly, taking the letter. "Let me be your fate in this—in everything that affects your life forever."

She walked quickly to the door, and I dropped the letter into the chute and hurried after her.

"You didn't turn round," I said as we started down the street. "For all you know, I've got the letter in my pocket."

"Oh, I'm not a bit frightened! It would be just as interesting one way as another."

"But I want you to stay forever," I declared as we waited on the curb for a truck to pass.

"The remark is almost impertinent," she answered, "when I've known you only seven days."

"They've been wonderful days. It really makes no difference about letters or your duties elsewhere. Where you go I shall certainly follow; that's something I should like to have understood here and now."

Loitering along the beach on our way home, I was guiltily conscious that I was making love rather ardently to a lady who had introduced herself to me as my uncle's widow. The sensation was, on the whole, very agreeable. . . .

"Mr. Torrence and Mr. Raynor," Antoine announced as we were leaving the dinner-table.

"Mr. Raynor?" asked Alice. "Who, pray, is Mr. Raynor?"

Their arrival together chilled me, a chill increased by Torrence's frosty greeting as he gripped my hand angrily and hissed in my ear:

"You've deceived me about this whole business! I suggest that you leave the room."

I was walking toward the door when Mrs. Farnsworth protested.

"You are not going? Alice, there is no reason why Mr. Singleton should leave us."

"Of course he is not going," said Alice. She was established at ease in a wicker rocker, unconcernedly plying the ostrich-plume fan.

"There may be matters—" began Torrence.

"Oh, nothing that Bob can't hear!" Alice declared.

"Very well," muttered Torrence, frowning his complete disapproval.

He fidgeted for a moment and tried to catch Raynor's eye, but Raynor's face expressed amusement. I found myself liking Raynor very much.

"Mr. Raynor told me that he wished to speak to Mrs. Bashford privately," said

Torrence. "If he's satisfied, I'm sure I have no objection to Mr. Singleton's remaining. I regret that my own duty is a disagreeable one."

"Really!" murmured Alice with nicely shaded impudence.

"I am convinced, beyond any question," said Torrence sharply, "that you are not the widow of the late Raymond B. Bashford!"

"That statement," said Alice without ceasing the languid flutter of the fan, "is correct—quite correct."

"Certainly: it is entirely true," affirmed Mrs. Farnsworth.

"And your coming here as you did is, if you will pardon my frankness, susceptible of very disagreeable constructions. It is my painful duty——"

He choked upon his duty until Raynor spoke, smiling broadly.

"I find my duty really a privilege," he said. "Not only are you not Mrs. Bashford," he went on with the utmost good humor, "but you are a very different person. I should explain that I represent the Amer-

ican State Department, and that our government has been asked by the British Embassy to find you and deliver a certain message to you."

"Oh, papa wants me to come home!" cried Alice. "It's droll, Constance, that papa should have thought of making an affair of state of us. Dear papa will always indulge me just so far, and then he becomes alarmed."

"He's certainly alarmed now!" laughed Raynor. "But the ambassador has warned us to be most tactful and circumspect. You may not know that Sir Arnold Seabring is on his way to this country on a confidential mission. That, of course, is not for publication."

"Sir Arnold Seabring?" gasped Torrence.

"The father of the Honorable Miss Seabring," replied Raynor with an elucidating nod toward Alice.

"But how—" I began.

"Mrs. Bashford, the widow of your uncle, is the Honorable Miss Seabring's aunt. Is that quite correct?"

"It is all true," said Alice. "I am a fraud,

an impostor. You might go on and say that Mrs. Farnsworth is the wife of Sir Cecil Arrowsmith. But all the guilt is mine. It was my idea to come here and play a little, because I knew Aunt Alice wouldn't mind. She knew just what I meant to do; really she did, Mr. Torrence! In fact, I have her written permission to use the house, which I should have shown you if we had got in a pinch. But it seemed so much more fun just to let matters take their course. It's a pet theory of mine that life is a dull affair unless we trust to luck a little. After my brother's death I was very unhappy and had gone out East to visit Aunt Alice, who is a great roamer. I thought it would be nice to stop here on the way home, just for a lark, without telling papa, who was frantically cabling me to hurry back to England. This isn't the first time I've played hide-and-seek with my family. I was always doing that as a child; and if it hadn't been for my general waywardness I should never have known you, Constance. Why, I shouldn't have known you, gentlemen! It has all been so delightful!"

This naïve confession amused Raynor

greatly, but Torrence was seeing nothing in it but a dangerous escapade.

"In the name of the Bainbridge Trust Company, I must notify you," he began, "that by representing yourself as another person, entering into possession of a large property——"

"But we've been paying all our own expenses; we haven't taken any money from you," pleaded Alice.

"Of course you wouldn't do such a thing," affirmed Raynor. "My instructions are to give you any sum of money you ask. In fact, the Government of the United States is instructed to assume full responsibility for you until your father arrives. May I go on and clarify matters for these gentlemen, for Mr. Torrence at least is entitled to a full explanation?"

"Constance," said Alice, turning with a little shrug to her friend, "we have been caught! Our story is being spoiled for us. Please go on, Mr. Raynor. Just what does the American State Department have to say about us?"

"That you are endowed with a very unusual

personality," continued Raynor, his eyes twinkling. "You are not at all content to remain in that station of life to which you were born; you like playing at being all sorts of other persons. Once, so your friend the ambassador confided to me, you ran away and followed a band of gypsies, which must have been when you were a very little girl."

"I was seven," said Alice, "and the gypsies were nice to me."

"And then you showed talent for the stage——"

"A dreadful revelation!" she exclaimed.

"But you don't know that it was really your father who managed to have Mrs. Farnsworth, one of the most distinguished actresses in England, take charge of you."

"No! Alice never knew that!" said Mrs. Farnsworth, laughing. "I was her chaperon as well as her preceptress; but Alice's father knew that if Alice found it out it would spoil the adventure for her. Alice must do things in her own way."

"You are a fraud," said Alice, "but I always suspected you a little."

"Speaking of the stage," resumed Raynor,

"it is also a part of my instructions that the Honorable Miss Seabring shall be discouraged from any further adventures in that direction; she's far too talented; there's danger of her becoming a great luminary. In other words, she is not to grace the boards again as Violet Dewing."

Alice's brow clouded, and she turned to me. "That was settled when you mailed that letter for me. It was to make an appointment with an American playwright who wants me to appear in a most adorable comedy."

"His name is Dick Searles," I said, "and he's my most intimate friend."

She professed indignation when I told of my eavesdropping in the woods, but when I explained that I knew all about the play and Searles's despairing search for her she was enormously pleased.

"How wonderful!" she exclaimed. "You know I told you, Constance, that if we really threw ourselves in the path of adventure mystery would come out to meet us in silken sandals."

"But you will not appear in this play?"

asked Raynor anxiously. "It is the business of the Government of the United States to see that you commit no further indiscretions. There is another matter which I hope you can clear up. You are not only a subject of concern to the British Embassy, but the French ambassador also has appealed to us to assist him in a trifling matter!"

"The French ambassador?" Alice exclaimed with a surprise I knew to be unfeigned. "I thought the dear Montani was an Italian?"

"We will continue to call him Montani, but he's a Frenchman and one of the keenest men in the French Secret Service. You have caused him the deepest anguish."

"Please hurry on!" She bent forward with childish delight. "This is a part of the story we've been living that I really know nothing about. I hope it won't be disappointing!"

Raynor laughed and shook his head.

"It's fortunate that Montani is a gentleman, anxious to shield and protect you. You have a fan in your hand——"

She spread it for our inspection.

"A harmless trinket, but without it the adventure would have been very tame."

"The story of the fan is in the most secret archives of Paris and Washington. When you were packing up in Tokyo to come home on the very last day before your departure a lady called on you whom you knew as Madame Volkoff."

"That dear woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Farnsworth. "We knew her very well."

"Almost too well," cried Raynor. "A cultivated woman and exceedingly clever, but a German spy. She had collected some most interesting data with reference to Japanese armament and defenses, but suspecting that she was being watched, she hit upon a most ingenious way of getting the information across the Pacific, expecting to communicate with German agents in America who could pick it up and pass it on to Berlin. You see, she thought you an easy mark. She got hold of a fan which Montani informs me is the exact counterpart of that one you hold. She reduced her data to the smallest possible compass, concealed it in her fan, and watched for a chance to exchange with you. The

astute Montani found the Japanese artisan who had done the tinkering for her and surmised that you were to be made the unconscious bearer of the incriminating papers. Montani jumped for the steamer you were sailing on with every determination to get the fan. His professional pride was aroused, and it was only after he found it impossible to steal the fan that he asked our assistance. He's a good fellow, a gentleman in every sense, and with true French chivalry wanted to do the job without disturbing you in any way."

We pressed closer about Raynor as he took the fan, spread it open, and held it close against a table-lamp. "The third, sixth, and ninth," he counted. "You will notice that those three pieces of ivory are a trifle thicker and not as transparent as the others. Glancing at them casually in an ordinary light, you would never suspect that they had been hollowed out, an exceedingly delicate piece of work. It's a pity to spoil anything so pretty, but——"

He snapped the top of one of the panels, disclosing a neatly folded piece of thin paper.

"If you are all satisfied, I will not go further. I want to deliver this to the French Embassy intact. I expect Montani here to-night; he will no doubt be enormously relieved."

A machine whizzed into the driveway, and Montani came in brushing past the astonished Antoine, who had answered the bell.

"The fan is safe," cried Raynor; "you may complete the identification."

"I've handled this whole affair most stupidly," said Montani after a hurried examination. "I'm satisfied that a German agent in America has picked up the trail of the fan. One or two lines of my own communications failed to work, and after reporting the whole matter to the French Embassy I began searching for a man, the most dangerous of all the German spies, who had been intrusted with the business of recovering Madame Volkoff's fan and passing the contents on to Berlin. This person has been representing himself as a French secret agent; he's enormously plausible. I feared he might attempt what I failed to do. If——"

Alice glanced at me, and I stepped to the wall and punched the button.

"Antoine," I said, "tie the arms of the prisoner in the tool-house and bring him here."

"A man in the tool-house!" Montani, Torrence, and Raynor ejaculated in concert.

"Oh, yes," murmured Alice, "that's the pleasantest chapter of all. Our grenadiers captured a whole invading army that made a night attack—one of the most remarkable engagements of the present war, Mr. Torrence."

"The battle of the Bell-Hops," I suggested. "The prisoner will be here in a moment."

While we waited Montani produced a photograph, instantly recognizable as a likeness of our prisoner.

"My reputation is saved!" he exclaimed excitedly. "That he should have been caught here! It is too much! I shall never forgive myself for not warning you of the danger. But you understand, mesdames, that I was sincerely anxious to recover the fan without letting you know its importance. When I found at Seattle and Chicago that you were travelling under assumed names, I was—pray, pardon me—deeply puzzled, the more

so because I had satisfied myself in Tokyo that you were loyal Englishwomen, and I believed you to be innocent of complicity with Madame Volkoff. Why you should have changed your names, I didn't know, but it's not my affair now."

"We saw you on the steamer and again in the hotel at Chicago. It was very amusing to be followed. We gave you the slip, stopped at Buffalo to see Niagara, and you came on here and scared the servants to death! But you were generous at every point," said Alice. "We changed our names so we could amuse ourselves here—at Bob's expense. So now I ask everybody's forgiveness!"

The prisoner, arriving at this moment, became the centre of interest. Without a word Montani walked up to him, brushed back his hair, and called our attention to a scar on the crown of his head.

"There can be no mistake. This is Adolph Schwenger, who passes as readily for a Frenchman as I do for an Italian. The capture is of great importance. I shall want the names of all the persons who assisted in the matter."

"It isn't quite clear to me," remarked Raynor, turning to me, "why you held that fellow and said nothing about it. If there had been a mistake, it would have been just a little embarrassing for you, Singleton."

"Chivalry!" Mrs. Farnsworth answered for me. "An anxious concern for the peace and dignity of two foolish women! I didn't know there was so much chivalry left in the world."

An hour was spent in explanations, and Raynor declared that I must write a full account of the Allied army in Connecticut and the capture of the spy. The State archives contained nothing that touched this episode for piquancy, he declared; and even the bewildered Torrence finally saw the joke of the thing and became quite human.

Raynor and Montani decided after a conference that the German agent should be taken to New York immediately, and I called Flynn to drive them down.

"It's most fortunate, sir, that you sent for him just when you did!" announced Antoine, nearly bursting with importance. "The boys had heard queer sounds in the night,

but could find nothing wrong. The prisoner had taken up the flooring at the back of the tool-house, and was scooping up the dirt. He'd got a place pretty near big enough to let him through. I suppose we ought to have noticed it, sir."

"You managed the whole thing perfectly, Antoine—you and all of you."

It was just as Raynor and Montani were leaving the house with the prisoner that we heard a commotion in the direction of the gates. I had sent word that no one was to be admitted to the grounds, but as I ran out the front door a machine was speeding madly toward the house. A dozen of the guards were yelling their protests at the invasion, and a spurt of fire preluded the booming of Zimmerman's shotgun.

"Get your man into the car and beat it," I shouted to Raynor, thinking an attempt was about to be made to rescue the prisoner.

The touring-car left just as a Barton taxi flashed into the driveway. The driver was swearing loudly at one of the Tyringham veterans who had wedged himself into the door of the machine. With some difficulty

I extricated Scotty from his hazardous position.

Searles jumped out (I had forgotten that he might arrive that night), but before I could greet him he swung round and assisted a lady to alight—a short, stout lady in a travelling cap, wrapped in a coat that fell to her heels. She began immediately to deliver orders in an authoritative tone as to the rescue of her belongings. Searles dived into the taxi and began dragging out a vast amount of small luggage, but my attention was diverted for a moment by Alice, who jumped down the steps and clasped her arms about the neck of the stout lady.

"Aunt Alice!" I heard her saying. "Why didn't you tell us to meet you?"

"Why didn't I tell you?" demanded the stout lady. "The moment you left me I knew I'd made a mistake in letting you come over here on one of your absurd larks! And from the row I had getting into the premises I judge that you're at your old tricks. Fired upon! Treated as though I were an outlaw! You shall never go out of my sight again!"

"Oh, please don't scold me!" Alice pleaded and turning to me: "This is Bob Singleton, your nephew."

Mrs. Bashford—and I made no question that Searles's companion was indubitably my uncle's widow—gave me her hand and smiled in a way that showed that she was not so greatly displeased with Alice as her words implied.

"Pay that driver for me and don't fail to tip him. Those Methuselahs at the gate all but killed him. It was only the vigorous determination of this gentleman, who very generously permitted me to share the only motor at the station, that I got through the gates alive! I beg your pardon, but what *is* your name?"

"Mrs. Bashford," I interposed, "my friend, Mr. Searles."

"Mr. Searles!" cried Alice, dropping a cage containing some weird Oriental bird which had been among my aunt's impedimenta. The bird squawked hideously.

"Miss Violet Dewing, permit me to present the author of 'Lady Larkspur'!"

Poor Torrence, clinging to a pillar for sup-

port, now revived sufficiently to be included in the introductions.

It was a week later that Alice and I sat on the stone wall watching the waves, at the point forever memorable as the scene of our first talk.

"Aunt Alice isn't playing fair," she said. "She pretends now that it was all my idea—coming over to play at being your uncle's widow, but she really encouraged me to do it so I could give her an impartial judgment of your character. I'm her only niece and her namesake, and she relies on me a good deal. You know she's very, very rich, and she had never any idea of keeping your uncle's money. She meant all the while to give it to you—provided she found you were nice. And she thinks you are very nice."

"Your own opinion of me would be interesting," I suggested.

She had gathered a handful of pebbles and was flinging them fitfully at a bit of driftwood. I wished her lips hadn't that little quiver that preluded laughter and that her eyes were not the haven of all the dreams in the world.

She landed a pebble on the target before replying.

"You are very nice, I think," she said with disconcerting detachment. "At first I was afraid you didn't like nonsense, but you really got through very well, considering the trouble I caused you. But I'm in trouble myself now. Papa will land to-morrow. He's the grandest, dearest man in all this world, but when he finds that I'm going to act in Mr. Searles's play he will be terribly cut up. Of course it will not be for long. Even if it's a big success, I'm to be released in three months. Constance and Sir Cecil think I owe it to myself to appear in the piece; they're good enough to say nobody else can do it so well—which is a question. I'm going to give all the money I earn to the blind soldiers."

(I wished the tears in her eyes didn't make them more lovely still!)

"Being what you are and all you are, it would be brutal for me to add to the number of things you have to tell your father. I'm a very obscure person, and he is a gentleman of title and otherwise distinguished. You are the Honorable Miss——"

"Papa has said numbers of times," she began softly, looking far out across the blue Sound—"he has said, oh, very often, that he'll never stop troubling about me until—until I'm happily married."

"When you came here you wore a wedding-ring," I remarked casually.

"It was only a 'property' ring, to help deceive you. I bought it in Chicago. When Aunt Alice came I threw it away."

"The finger seems lonesome without it," I said. "If I get you another, I hope you'll take better care of it."

"If you should put it there," she replied, looking fixedly at the hand, "that would be very, very different."

THE END

University of California
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
Return this material to the library
from which it was borrowed.

SRLF
QL

OCT 10 1988

a14307

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY

A 000 058 215 5